

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 1981

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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 1981

VOLUME 45
ISSN 0025-3621

NUMBER 12

EDWARD GOLDSTEIN
ANITA GOLDSTEIN
Publishers

CHARLES E. FRITCH
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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY
MAGAZINE, Vol. 45, No. 12,
December 1981. Published
monthly by Renown Publica-
tions, Inc., P.O. Box 178,
Redwood, CA 91335. Subscrip-
tions: One Year (12 Issues)
\$15.00. Two Years (24 Issues)
\$28.00. Canada, One Year
\$18.00; Two Years \$34.00.
Foreign, One Year \$21.00;
Two Years \$36.00. (U.S. Funds
Only.) Second Class postage
paid at Van Nuys, CA and at
additional mailing offices.
Events and characters in this
magazine are wholly fictitious.
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American Conventions. Printed
in the United States of America.
Postmaster — return P.O. Box
178, Redwood, CA 91335.

DEATH IN THE DAILIES

by Brett Halliday

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a real killer got into the act. Then the corpses
were for real!* 4

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*The title of the movie was MANSION OF BLOOD.
It was supposed to be make believe — but someone
was trying to turn it into reality!*

Death In The Dailies

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE YOUNG GIRL RAN THROUGH THE SWAMP, terror etched on her lovely face. Her mane of tousled blond hair streamed behind her as she raced along the path through the undergrowth. She was wearing cutoff blue jeans and a halter top, and even in her terrified flight, she was undeniably beautiful.

She had to watch where she was going, or she might step off the path into the treacherous muck of the swamp. Birds exploded from the limbs of the stunted trees and took off into the clear blue Florida sky with a flutter of wings, spooked by the chase going on beneath them. The air was filled with the harsh panting breaths of the pursued girl, and behind her, a sound of someone . . . or something . . . crashing through the brush.

Sunlight filtered down through the latticework of the tree branches and cast a flickering pattern over the girl's features as she ran. Over the pounding of her own heart, she could hear the sounds of pursuit, and they spurred her on to even greater efforts.

And then the sounds stopped.

She ran on for several moments before she realized that she could no longer hear the crashing behind her. Slowing, she listened closer and still heard nothing but the cries of the birds as they fled from the disturbance of their world. The girl came to a stop, gasping for breath, and leaned against the bole of a tree.

She didn't see the long green shape that came slithering down the trunk of the tree until it was too late. The snake slid out onto the smooth, creamy skin of her bare shoulder and looped itself down over the mounds of her breasts.

She screamed.

It was a long, piercing scream that had all the horror of her predicament packed into it. As she twisted around, grabbing frantically at the snake, a long arm came out of the brush and plucked the serpent from her, flinging it away. A man stepped out of the undergrowth and said, "There, there, my dear. The snake won't hurt you. I won't let anything out here in the swamp hurt you."

She cringed from him, looking even more frightened now than she had when the snake crawled on her. The man was tall and thin, with a gaunt face topped by a wild shock of white hair. His voice was gentle, but underneath the concern he projected was an undercurrent of something else, something dark and twisted and evil. His fingers curled into the soft flesh of her upper arm and pulled her toward him. She was too scared to even scream now.

"Look there," he said, pointing with his free hand. A few yards away, an alligator slid from a mud bank into the dark green water of the swamp. The old man went on, holding the girl in a deceptively powerful grip, "You shall soon be seeing one ten times that large, my dear. You cannot imagine how awesome a sight that is. But you won't have to imagine, will you? You'll be right down there in the basement with my pet. I'm sure the two of you will like each other." He started dragging her toward an old house that could barely be seen through the trees. It was a huge, turreted old mansion, and it looked to be on the brink of collapse. But it was home to the old man, who kept pulling the girl with him as he laughed. "You see, my dear, my little pet has always liked young women with good taste. Hahahahaha!"

"*And cut!*" Five yards away, off to the side, a young man turned to a woman holding a clipboard and said, "We'll bring the music up right there and then go back into the house. Got it? Okay." He raised his voice. "Good job on the master, folks. Now let's get the cutaways done, all right? Way to go, Jenny; you, too, Marcus."

Timothy Rourke said in a low voice, "This is the most unadulterated garbage I've ever seen."

SECONDS BEFORE, IT SEEMED AS IF THE OLD MAN AND THE girl were the only humans in the swamp, but now the air was full of the hustle and bustle of a dozen people going about their jobs. The cameras were being repositioned, sound men were checking the levels with

their equipment, a man with a light meter was standing next to the beautiful young girl and making calculations . . . The business of movie-making was in full swing.

Rourke, top feature writer for the Miami *Daily News*, stood in the background, next to a chunky, sweating man in a limp suit. The director, a lean man with sandy hair, was sitting in a folding chair a few feet away from Rourke and the other man. He must have heard the reporter's remark, because he looked around with a grin and said, "Ain't it, though? We've got a budget of four million dollars, though, Mr. Rourke, and this sucker'll gross at least ten million over that, probably more, just in a few weeks at the drive-ins next summer. Can't argue with that."

"You sure as hell can't," the chunky man said, using a handkerchief to mop at the perspiration on his balding forehead. "*Mansion of Blood* is going to be a big winner, hokey title and all. You just wait and see, Mr. Rourke."

"Oh, I don't doubt it a bit, Mr. McCluskey," Rourke said. "When was the last time a Barney McCluskey Production lost money, especially one written and directed by John Falcone?"

"Our pictures have never lost money," Falcone said from his director's chair. "Even *Attack of the Kung Fu Vampires* finally made its cost back overseas."

"I take it that was before you were nominated for the Oscar," Rourke said dryly.

"Right. Before the Oscar nomination and after the porno movies. You getting all of this down?"

McCluskey said quickly, "Mr. Rourke's not here to do an article about our past work, John. What he's interested in is *Mansion of Blood*."

"And Miss Fontana," Rourke grinned. "Marcus Van Horn making a comeback after ten years of retirement is a good story, but some pictures of Jenny Fontana will help sell more papers."

"You can have all the pictures you want," McCluskey said. "Anything to help out the press, Mr. Rourke."

Rourke believed him. McCluskey had been breaking his back to impress and please Rourke all day, ever since Rourke had shown up at the site of the location shooting in the Everglades. Maybe his reporter's instincts were just being overzealous, Rourke thought, but he suspected that all was not sweetness and light on this shoot. If it was, McCluskey wouldn't be trying so hard.

"Have you met Marcus yet?" Falcone asked. Rourke liked the unpretentious young director. Falcone knew that what he was doing

wasn't great cinema art, and he didn't pretend otherwise. He just tried to do the best he could with what he had.

Rourke shook his head in answer to Falcone's question, and Falcone called the white-haired old man over. He said, "Great scene, Marcus. I'd like you to meet Tim Rourke. He's a reporter for one of the Miami papers."

Van Horn extended a hand to Rourke. "Oh, yes I've read your work, Mr. Rourke. Very nice to meet you." There was a faint, barely noticeable trace of an English accent about his words. Rourke knew he had a reputation for being charming, and so far he had seen nothing to disprove it. The veteran of over fifty horror movies during the Forties, Fifties, Sixties, and early Seventies, Van Horn had been lured out of retirement to make one last blood-chiller. The fact that the quality of the film was worlds below those he had made earlier in his career didn't really matter. Rourke had to admit that when Van Horn was in front of the cameras, there was a magic there that was too seldom seen now.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Van Horn," Rourke said. "I've been a fan of yours for a long time."

Van Horn laughed. "Please don't say how long. I don't need any more reminders of my longevity. Which is just another way of saying that I'm getting old, I suppose."

"Nonsense," McCluskey said. "You're better than you ever were. Marcus."

"Thank you for saying that, Barney. I shall try to live up to it."

Over Van Horn's shoulder, Rourke saw Jenny Fontana coming out of the trailer she was using as a dressing room during these exterior shots. Of course, considering the briefness of her outfit, she wouldn't need much of a dressing room, Rourke mused. He had been telling the truth earlier. As nice as Marcus Van Horn was, as important as he had been to the history of the horror movie, the real story now was Jenny Fontana. Even at a distance of a hundred yards or so, like now, she had a beauty, a visceral sex appeal that was undeniable. A hundred feet high on a movie screen, she just sizzled.

She came by her attractiveness honestly. Her father was Mark Fontana, whose dark handsomeness had been so effective during his career as a singer twenty years before. For a while, he had run a good race with Elvis and Frankie and all the others, before getting out of the movies and into the nightclubs, where he had made a small fortune. And Jenny's mother . . . Rourke sighed. Jenny's mother was Claire Mannering, who had been the epitome of cool British loveliness. In the most recent photo of her he had seen, in fact, she was still breath takingly lovely, even in her forties. It stood to reason that their daughter

would be the prettiest kid to come along in Hollywood in a long time.

Yeah, there was plenty of material here for a story, Rourke thought, which was more than he had hoped for when he got the assignment. He hadn't wanted to come way out here in the Glades to watch the filming of some blood-and-gore flick, even a big budget one like *Mansion of Blood*. Now he was glad he had gone along with his editor's intuition.

HE WAS EXCHANGING SMALL TALK with Falcone, Van Horn, and McCluskey, enjoying himself and getting plenty of good quotes for his story, when a sudden commotion from the fringes of the activity caught his attention. Striding toward the little clearing where Falcone sat in his director's chair was a tall man in jeans and a work shirt. He had a swarthy face and a thick black moustache, and at first Rourke thought he was Darren Frye, the actor who was playing the second male lead behind Van Horn, the hero who ultimately rescues Jenny from the clutches of Van Horn's character.

But it wasn't Frye, Rourke saw as the man came closer, anger suffusing his face. Another man was catching at his arm and trying to stop him, only to be shaken off roughly.

"I want to talk to you, Falcone!" the angry man barked as he came striding up. "What the hell is this I hear about you not liking that gag we did yesterday?"

Falcone broke off what he had been saying to Rourke and looked wearily at the second man, the one who had been trying to restrain the angry one. He said, "I thought I told you to explain it all to Hal, Jack."

"I did, Mr. Falcone," the man called Jack said. He, too, was tall and well-built, but he was a little older than the other man, with generous streaks of grey in his dark hair. "I told him you said the angle was wrong and that something was wrong with the sound."

"Yeah, Jack told me all right," Hal snapped. "And I don't give a damn about any of that. If you want that gag done again, Falcone, you're going to have to double my price."

Falcone stood up. "It's not that dangerous a stunt, Hal, just an explosion. You're just trying to hold us up because you know how much it would cost to bring in another double for Darren."

McCluskey held up his hands, casting a glance at Rourke, who was watching the argument with interest. "Now, now, boys," he said. "No need to air our dirty linen in public, is there? I want both of you to meet Mr. Rourke. Mr. Rourke is a reporter."

The greying man who had tried to act as a peacemaker stuck out a hand to Rourke. "I'm Jack Crosland, the stunt coordinator on the pic-

ture," he introduced himself. "And this is Hal Olson, my best man. Glad to meet you."

Rourke shook hands with both of them. Olson remained truculent, but he didn't argue any more with Falcone. He only said, "We'll talk about this later, Falcone. Believe it!"

As he stalked away, Rourke looked around the set. He hadn't been imagining things. There was a definite feeling of tension in the air, and he saw several of the crew members snap at each other as they worked to set up the next shot. Falcone rubbed a hand over his face, glared after Olson's retreating back, then sat down again. In a low voice, he murmured, "If things don't stop going wrong . . ."

McCluskey took Rourke's arm and steered him away, toward another one of the small trailers that dotted the area. This one served as a lounge and traveling bar. Drinking wasn't allowed for the cast and crew during working hours, Rourke knew, but he supposed that didn't apply to producers and reporters.

He sat in a chair like Falcone's while McCluskey got them both a drink. The balding producer was really desperate not to get any bad ink on this picture. Evidently, they had had a run of bad luck already . . .

ROURKE PRETENDED TO LISTEN POLITELY while McCluskey rattled on for the next half-hour or so. Falcone got things rolling again, shooting several small scenes from different angles, so that they could be edited into the long master shot that Rourke had seen earlier. This was the first time Rourke had seen a movie being made, and the thing that struck him the most was the large amount of hurry-up-and-wait going on. It was almost boring, and he wasn't paying close attention anymore.

Jenny Fontana broke that boredom . . . shattered it, in fact. She walked over to her trailer after completing a shot, opened the door and stepped inside . . .

Before, she had been acting when she screamed, and as good as she was, it had been no match for the shriek that came from her throat now.

She was still screaming as Rourke exploded from his chair and joined the caravan that was running across the clearing toward Jenny's trailer. She came stumbling back out, her hands pressed against her face, the cry still ripping from deep inside her. Rourke and Falcone were the first ones there, with Jack Crosland and Darren Frye right behind them. Frye caught Jenny in his arms and held her tightly while the others crowded into the doorway.

When Rourke saw what was inside, he braked to a sudden stop and

said, "Hold it. Nobody touch anything until the cops get here, okay? They won't like it if you do."

McCluskey had turned pale and could do nothing but stand there and swallow silently. Crosland said brokenly, "Oh, hell. Oh, no. Hell."

Hal Olson was on the floor of Jenny's trailer. Rourke had to look closely to make sure it was indeed Olson and not Darren Frye, since the two men were dressed alike in addition to their resemblance, but he was certain now that the sprawled figure was that of the stunt double. As for the knife that was protruding from Olson's middle, surrounded by a red stain on the shirt, there was no mistaking that.

"You act like you've seen murdered men before, Rourke," Falcone said. He seemed to have his wits about him more than any of the others except Rourke.

"Yeah, I have," Rourke said. "Too many times. But that's all part of the game when your best friend is Mike Shayne"

II

EIGHT HOURS LATER, THAT BEST FRIEND THAT ROURKE had mentioned was sitting in one of Miami's posher restaurants, a place called the Bronze Dolphin, drumming his long blunt fingers on the expensive tablecloth and sipping occasionally at a glass of Martell. Even though Shayne was big, with a rough-hewn face and coarse red hair that never seemed to be totally under control, he didn't look out of place here. Being able to fit in almost anywhere was a valuable asset for a private investigator to cultivate.

"Now, don't get impatient, Michael," the beautiful, brown-haired girl across the table said. "You know Tim wouldn't be late unless he had a good reason."

"Yeah," Shayne grunted. "And to Tim, a good reason is anything blond, female, and under thirty."

Lucy Hamilton smiled, knowing Rourke almost as well as her big redheaded employer did. During the years she had been Shayne's secretary, she had gotten well acquainted with the lanky reporter.

"I guess Tim does get distracted sometimes, but he — Oh, there he is now, Michael. But who's that man with him?"

Shayne looked up to see Rourke coming into the restaurant, and with him was a balding man who was overweight and on the short side. "Don't know, Angel," he said. "Maybe we'll find out in a minute."

Rourke had spotted Shayne and Lucy and was making his way across the crowded dining room toward them. The other man was right at his

heels. As Rourke came up to the table, he said, "Hi, you two. Sorry I'm late for our dinner."

"What happened, Tim?" Shayne asked.

Rourke grinned crookedly. "I got an invitation I couldn't turn down. From a country sheriff."

One of Shayne's bushy brows lifted in puzzlement. "Sit down and us about it."

"Just what I had in mind. Mike, Lucy, this is Barney McCluskey. He's producing the movie I went out to write about today. McCluskey, meet Mike Shayne and his secretary, Lucy Hamilton."

As Rourke was pulling out a chair and sitting down, McCluskey shook hands with Shayne and said, "It's a real pleasure to meet you, Mr. Shayne. Mr. Rourke here has told me a lot about you."

"Why don't you join us for dinner, Mr. McCluskey?" Lucy asked. "Now, Tim, what's this about a sheriff?"

Rourke put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. He said one word. "Murder."

Lucy caught her breath. "Oh, no! Not that adorable little Jenny Fontana, I hope."

Rourke shook his head. "A stuntman," he said. "Guy named Hal Olson. It did happen in Jenny Fontana's dressing room, though."

SHAYNE'S GREY EYES HAD NARROWED TO SLITS when Rourke mentioned murder, and now he took another sip of the smooth cognac and said, "Start at the beginning."

Rourke turned to the producer. "You want to tell it, or are you too tired from going over it with the sheriff's men?"

McCluskey heaved a sigh. "I suppose I can tell it one more time. That's why I came here with you, after all. I wonder, could I have a drink?"

Shayne signaled for their waiter and had drinks brought for Rourke and McCluskey. When the producer had gulped a healthy swallow of his, he said, "What happened today, Mr. Shayne, was only the culmination of a string of events, each of them getting worse as it went along. If I didn't know better, I'd say *Mansion of Blood* was cursed."

Lucy shuddered at the title, while Shayne asked, "I suppose that's the name of the movie you're making out in the Glades?"

"That's right. It should be a good money-maker, what with Marcus Van Horn coming out of retirement to do it and Jenny Fontana having her biggest part yet. But it'll never reach the screen unless our luck changes for the better. Do you want to hear about all of it?"

"Might as well," Shayne said. "You were planning on trying to hire me, weren't you?"

"Told you he was a hell of a detective," Rourke said dryly.

"Yes, I would like to hire you," McCluskey went on quickly. "Someone is trying to ruin this movie, though I can't understand why. Since the first day of shooting, we've had some trouble every week. Most of it has been fairly minor up until today, malfunctioning equipment, film that gets lost between the lab and the studio, just a lot of little things that has everybody on edge. You can't get much work done on a movie set when everyone is snapping at each other."

"But somebody did more than snap today," Shayne prodded.

"Someone stuck a knife in Hal Olson," McCluskey said tightly.

"No prints on the knife," Rourke said. "And the body was found in Jenny Fontana's dressing room, by the young lady herself. Actually, rather than a dressing room, it was a little trailer, since they were shooting exteriors today." The newshound grinned sardonically. "See how quick I pick up the lingo."

"Day for night," McCluskey murmured. "That's what they call what we were doing today, shooting day for night."

"How awful it must have been for her," Lucy said. "Do the police know who did it, Tim?"

Rourke shrugged. "If they do, they're not telling anybody. I'd say they don't have the slightest idea who did it."

Shayne downed the rest of his drink and said, "What is it you want me to do, Mr. McCluskey? Find out who killed this Olson?"

McCluskey looked up. "That's exactly what I want you to do, Mr. Shayne. And I want you to find out if the killer is also the one responsible for giving us so much trouble all along. This business has to stop, if we're going to come in on time and within the budget."

SHAYNE GOT THE IMPRESSION THAT MCCLUSKEY was more interested in saving money than in finding a killer, but he supposed that was natural enough for a producer. Money, not people, would be his main worry all the time. Fingers straying up to tug gently on his left earlobe, Shayne said, "It sounds like an interesting case. I'm tempted to take it . . ."

"If it's a matter of money, don't worry. I'm sure I can get the financial backers to agree to any reasonable fee. They want this trouble to end even more than I do."

Shayne shook his head. "I was just wondering how the cops handling this case would feel about a private detective sticking his nose in."

The balding producer tossed back the rest of his drink and looked disgusted. "I don't really care about that, Mr. Shayne. We've also had some trouble with vandalism out at the location, and the sheriff's men have been less than efficient about handling it. They haven't been too sympathetic, either, I might add. One of them even told me I should go back to Hollywood and stop making trouble in Florida."

A grin stretched Shayne's mouth. "That sounds about like something a deputy out in the Glades would say. Some of them don't care much for outsiders." He paused, considering for a moment, then nodded abruptly. "I'll look into it for you. I assume you want things kept as quiet as possible?"

"We'd love it. They say there's no such thing as bad publicity, but don't you believe it. Mr. Rourke has already agreed to hold off on writing his story"

Shayne shot a quizzical look at Rourke. It wasn't like him to take it easy on any story, let alone one this explosive. Rourke grinned back at him and said, "I had a hunch you'd want to take this one, Mike, and it'll be a lot better story after you crack the case, right?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Shayne growled.

"If you'd like, I can write you a check now," McCluskey began, but Shayne shook his head.

"Lucy here will draw up a contract in the morning and send it to you," he said. "You can send the retainer back to her. I probably won't be in my office tomorrow."

"You mean you can't start right away?" McCluskey sounded devastated.

"I mean I think we should all have a good dinner, and then I'll head on out there tonight. I'll give you a ride back if you need it, McCluskey."

The producer's face lit up at Shayne's words. "No, thanks, I've got my car here in town. But I can't tell you how pleased I am that you've taken the case, Mr. Shayne. I just didn't trust the sheriff's men to get to the bottom of things."

Shayne noticed a slight frown on Lucy's face. "What's wrong, Angel?" he asked. "Something about the set-up you don't like?"

She didn't answer his question, turned instead to Tim Rourke. She asked him, "Tim, is Jenny Fontana as pretty in person as she is on the screen?"

"Prettier," Rourke grinned broadly. "She is dynamite. Absolute dynamite."

Lucy glanced back at Shayne, and the big detective sucked on a tooth and tried not to grin like Rourke.

"I think I see now," Lucy nodded. "This should be an interesting case for you, Michael."

"I hope so," Shayne said. "I sure hope so."

IT WAS A LITTLE AFTER ELEVEN O'CLOCK when Shayne wheeled his Buick into the little town of Norwood, Florida, a normally tiny village nestled on the edge of the Everglades. He was alone, McCluskey having started back earlier from Miami, but it hadn't been difficult to locate the town. The movie people had swelled its population considerably. They were all staying in the town's one motel, according to McCluskey, and Shayne could see its lights up ahead beside the road. The old mansion that was the principal set for the film was about a mile away, down a dirt road that turned off the highway just past the motel.

As Shayne pulled into the parking lot of the motel, he saw that the small combination bar and cafe next to the office building was doing a booming business. The windows of the place showed it to be full of people. That was part of making a movie on location, Shayne supposed. The fast-living folks from Hollywood had to take what fun and relaxation they could find wherever they could find it, and even the death of one of their company wouldn't completely put a stop to the nightly reveling that made up for the days of hard work and tedium. Shayne parked the car in front of the office and swung out of it, standing and stretching muscles slightly cramped from the long drive from Miami. It was fairly dark here, though a night light was on inside the office. Most of the illumination on the parking lot came from the flashing neon sign out by the road. It cast a red and blue glow over the whole area.

And that light was enough for Shayne to see the knife that suddenly came at him out of the shadows, whipping through the air right at his face

III

IT WASN'T EVERY DAY THAT SOMEONE TRIED TO KILL HIM, but it had happened enough during his career that Shayne's sixth sense was always on the lookout for an attempt on his life. As the knife sliced toward him, he threw himself to the side, diving back into the front seat of the Buick through the still-open door. The knife cut through the air where his throat had been a split-second earlier.

Shayne's hand went under his coat, coming back out with his pistol. He raised up and peered through the windshield at the night that had suddenly turned deadly. There was a flicker of movement at the corner

of one of the motel's cabins, and then it was gone.

He knew perfectly well that the movement might be a decoy designed to draw him into a trap, but Shayne was out of the car and charging toward the cabin in an instant, anyway. His gun was gripped tightly in his hand, ready to blast away as he skidded around the corner of the cabin. In the dim moonlight that illuminated the area behind the motel, he again caught a flicker of something.

The pistol came up and leveled on the scrub brush where the quarry had disappeared, but Shayne stayed his pressure on the trigger at the last moment. Blasting away as soon as he arrived would completely ruin whatever chance he might have to conduct his investigation subtly. He breathed a curse. Then his long legs surged into motion again, carrying him toward the brush behind the motel at a dead run.

It was hopeless, Shayne found after a few minutes of poking around in the bushes. On a night as dark as this one, in territory with which he wasn't familiar, his chances of finding his attacker were nil. Shayne gave it up as a bad job and headed back toward the motel, although he did keep his gun out and ready until he got back to the parking lot.

Shayne opened a screen door and stepped into the office. The night light that burned behind the desk furnished enough light for him to see all of the little room. There was a bell on the counter to ring for service, and Shayne banged it with a big hand.

A door behind the desk opened a moment later, revealing a room filled with the blue glow of a TV screen. The man that stepped up behind the counter to greet Shayne was middle-aged and heavysset, with curly grey hair and thick glasses. He said, "Help you, mister?"

"Two things," Shayne said. "I need a room, and I need to know where I can find John Falcone."

The man grinned toothily. "So happens we got one room left, friend, you're lucky there. With all these movie people around, we've been full up most of the time."

Shayne started filling out the registration card that the man took from under the counter and shoved across to him. The clerk turned on a small lamp to give Shayne better light, and asked, "You with the movie people? I figured you must be when you asked about Mr. Falcone."

"Yeah, I'm working for them," Shayne said. "You never did tell me where I could find him."

"More'n likely, he's over to the cafe, but he could be in his room, I guess. It's number 14, right across the courtyard." He took the registration card back and turned it so that he could read it. "You'll be in number 23, Mr. Shayne, down at the end. It's kind of small, but

like I say, it's all we've got vacant."

Shayne grunted noncommittally and took the key that the man extended across the desk. After he had paid for the room, he went back to the Buick and pulled it across the courtyard, stopping in front of the last cabin on that side of the motel. The numbers announcing it as number 23 hung crookedly on the door.

It took only a few minutes for Shayne to unload his one suitcase and turn the air conditioner on in his cabin. Then he walked briskly toward the front of the motel and Falcone's cabin, his eyes darting from side to side so that they could pick up any more danger coming out of the shadows.

THERE HAD BEEN A LIGHT ON IN FALCONE'S CABIN EARLIER, Shayne had noticed, and it was still burning now. That might not mean that the director was there, though. Still, it wouldn't hurt to try. Shayne raised a hand and let his knobby knuckles collide with the wood of the door.

After a moment had gone by with no response, he decided that Falcone wasn't in the cabin. But then the door swung open a few inches, and a voice asked in none too happy tones, "Yeah, what is it?"

"Mr. Falcone?" Shayne asked.

"That's right," Falcone answered. Shayne could see the man's eyes peering out at him and looking puzzled. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Mike Shayne, and I'd like to talk to you —"

"Oh, no," Falcone interrupted. "Not the gumshoe Barney was talking about. He didn't really hire you, did he?"

"He did," Shayne said flatly. "And I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Falcone opened the door the rest of the way. "Make it quick, will you? I was just on my way over to the bar for a drink."

Shayne stepped into the room and saw that it was a twin for his own cabin. Before he could say anything, Falcone went on, "This is about Hal Olson's murder, isn't it? Barney said he didn't trust the local cops to find the killer."

"He told me the same thing. I get the impression you don't agree with him."

Falcone shrugged his shoulders. He was dressed in casual clothes, and with his young-looking appearance, looked more like one of the students that flocked to Florida every spring vacation, rather than a seasoned veteran of more than twenty movies. He said, "I don't like the whole idea of being mixed up in a murder. We had enough problems before that happened."

"McCluskey told me about those, too. Do you think that whoever killed Olson is behind all the other acts of sabotage?"

Falcone raised an eyebrow. "I never said I thought our bad luck was sabotage."

"McCluskey seems to think it is."

"Barney can think what he wants to. He's the producer. Me, I just don't know, Shayne. It seems to me that nearly everything that could go wrong with this picture has gone wrong. But some projects are just jinxed from the word go."

"Do you know of anyone who would have a reason to want Olson dead?" Shayne was lighting a cigarette as he asked the question, but all of his attention was on Falcone without appearing to be.

"Hal Olson was damn good stuntman, but he wasn't a real likable guy," Falcone said dryly. "I don't *know* of anybody who was out to get him, but I can conceive of somebody holding a big grudge against him."

"I heard that the two of you had quite a disagreement this afternoon," Shayne prodded. "Something about a stunt you wanted him to do over."

Falcone's face tightened. "Where did you hear — Never mind. That nosy reporter friend of yours. Tim Rourke, yeah. I guess you know all about us, don't you, Shayne?"

"Not as much as I'd like to," Shayne replied. "I don't know which one of you stuck a knife in Hal Olson yet. But I'm going to find out."

Falcone looked at him long and hard for a moment, then said, "Don't get me wrong, Shayne. I don't like being a suspect in a murder, but I know I didn't kill Olson. And I'd like for someone to find out who did. So if I can help you, short of confessing to something I didn't do"

"You can," Shayne said. "Take me over to the bar and introduce me around. I'm going to have to meet everybody sooner or later, and now's as good a time as any."

Falcone nodded. "Sure. Do I let on that you're a private eye?"

"I don't imagine it's a very well kept secret by now. Don't worry about it."

Falcone locked his door behind them as they went out. As they walked across the parking lot toward the office and the bar beyond, Shayne said casually, "Have you been in your cabin all evening? I thought you'd be over here raising hell with all the other Hollywood types."

Falcone laughed, but it was a dry, unpleasant sound. "Of course. I should have expected that you would think anyone from Hollywood is

engaged in a never-ending orgy. All the people from out of town do."

"You're the one who's from out of town here, Falcone," Shayne said quietly. "That doesn't mean a damn thing to me, but it does to some of the people around here."

"We're trying not to offend any of the locals. Hell, most of them have been very helpful to us."

Falcone hadn't answered Shayne's question about whether or not he had been in his cabin all evening, and that fact hadn't escaped Shayne. The director might not want to admit that he didn't have an alibi for the time when someone had attacked Shayne. Shayne gave Falcone a glance out of the corner of his eye as he mulled over the situation. Someone had killed Olson with a knife, and then when Shayne arrived on the scene, a knife had been thrown at him. Did the similarities in method indicate that only one person was involved in the two attacks? It seemed likely to Shayne, but he had run across more than one case in which one culprit imitated the methods of another in order to blow smoke across the trail.

Shayne didn't press Falcone on the matter, but he resolved to keep a close eye on the man. They reached the door of the bar, and Falcone shoved the door open and led the way in.

THE ATMOSPHERE INSIDE WAS SMOKY AND FULL OF NOISE. A jukebox was blaring away in one corner, and everyone in the place seemed to be talking as well. Several people called greetings to Falcone, and even more looked quizzically at Shayne, wondering who he was. As Shayne looked around the crowded room, he saw quite a few faces he recognized, but only one of them belonged to someone he had met. That was Barney McCluskey, who was sitting at a table with a gaunt, white-haired man whom Shayne recognized as Marcus Van Horn. Jenny Fontana was leaning over a pool table on the other side of the room, her figure displayed to its fullest advantage in a pair of tight slacks and a silk shirt that was unbuttoned halfway down her torso. Wending his way through the crowd toward her from the bar, his hands full of beer mugs, was Darren Frye. Shayne had to search through his memory to match Frye's name with his face, since he didn't go to the movies very much, but he knew Jenny Fontana right away. It was impossible not to recognize her, after over a year of media blitz centered around her.

McCluskey raised a hand and beckoned Shayne and Falcone over to the table. "Have any trouble finding the place, Mr. Shayne?" he asked. "I know if you blink, you're liable to miss Norwood."

"No trouble," Shayne said over the blare of the jukebox. He ex-

tended a hand across the table to the white-haired man and went on, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Van Horn; I've seen some of your movies on television. I'm Mike Shayne."

Van Horn returned the firm handshake. "No need to introduce yourself, Mr. Shayne," he said. "Like many of my colleagues in the film industry, I like to read crime stories. So I know all about you."

"Don't believe everything you read in books," Shayne grinned, sitting down in one of the chairs that Falcone pulled up from another table. "Most of the time the facts of the cases have been pretty well dressed up."

"Still, I'm sure you'll get to the bottom of this dreadful murder. We all have the utmost confidence in you."

Shayne shot a glance at McCluskey. "You told everyone I was coming, and why?"

McCluskey looked embarrassed. "Well, actually I just told a few people . . . but in this business, telling a few people is like shouting from the rooftops."

"Especially out on location," Falcone added. "There's not much to do in Norwood, Shayne, except drink and play pool and gossip. I'm afraid any investigation you conduct around here will be pretty much out in the open."

Shayne suppressed the curse he felt inside and said, "That just makes it that much simpler. Suppose I start right now. Who had a chance to slip into Jenny Fontana's trailer and stab Olson?"

Falcone laughed. "You ever watch a movie being made, Shayne? I didn't think so. It's controlled pandemonium. In between shots, everyone has a different job to do, and usually nobody's paying any attention to anybody else. It's so hectic, *anybody* could have slipped away from his normal position for a few minutes. The only time everybody is quiet and still is when the cameras are rolling."

"Did any of you see anything unusual just before Jenny found the body?"

"I'm afraid no one was watching for anything unusual," Van Horn said. Falcone nodded in agreement with the aging actor.

Shayne had already questioned McCluskey on these matters, back in Miami, and he had gotten the same sort of answers from the producer. No one had expected a murder, so no one had picked up on any of the clues that had to be there.

He was about to continue that line of questioning, futile though it might turn out to be, when a soft hand came down on his shoulder. Shayne looked around and saw smooth female skin six inches in front of his face. Jenny Fontana was standing beside his chair, and with the

way her shirt was gaping open, her right breast was almost completely exposed. She said, "Isn't anybody going to introduce me to this beautifully ugly man?"

She was drunk, Shayne saw right away. But she was incredibly lovely, and he could understand what Tim Rourke had meant when he talked about her. He said, "I'm Mike Shayne, Miss Fontana."

"The shamus!" she exclaimed. "You're here to find the big bad murderer who killed poor Hal." She leaned closer to him. "Tell me, Mr. Shamus, am I a suspect?"

"Everybody is," Shayne said bluntly, wishing the view wasn't quite so distracting. There were a few questions he wouldn't mind asking Jenny Fontana while she was off her guard.

He didn't get the chance. Darren Frye loomed up behind her, took her arm, and pulled her gently from the table. He said, "Come on, Jenny we've got a game to finish. It's your shot." He was gripping a pool cue tightly in his other hand, and Shayne didn't miss the hostile glance that came in his direction.

Jenny pouted and said, "Oh, hell, Darren. You're no fun." But she turned away from the table and walked unsteadily back across the room.

Frye stood there for a second, glaring at Shayne, then he said, "I know who you are, Shayne. If you know what's good for you, you'll stick to detecting and keep your eyes and your hands off Jenny." He turned on his heels and stalked away.

"Which just goes to prove," Marcus Van Horn said, lifting his drink to his lips, "that not all the bad acting occurs on the silver screen."

SHAYNE SAT AT THE TABLE WITH FALCONE, MCCLUSKEY, and Van Horn for several more minutes, sipping a drink and questioning them about the acts of sabotage that had plagued the film. He got the same sort of information from Falcone and Van Horn as he had gotten from the producer earlier. Until the death of Hal Olson, nothing really serious had happened, when the problems were considered individually. But taken all together, they had been more than enough to slow production down considerably and put the picture in danger of going over its budget. The three men claimed to have no idea why anyone would want to put *Mansion of Blood* in the red, but Shayne was reserving his judgment on that. He wanted to do some checking on the film's financing for himself.

It didn't seem likely to him that anyone would commit murder just to cause trouble on a movie location, but he wasn't that familiar with these Hollywood people. He wasn't sure what lengths any of them

would go to, in order to get what they wanted.

It was after midnight now, and the members of the cast and crew were filtering out of the bar, headed back to their motel rooms. The call for the next day's work would come early, Shayne knew, and even these hard-driving people from the West Coast had to have some sleep.

He had just seen Jenny Fontana go out the door when he said good night to the other three people at the table and stood up. McCluskey asked, "You're going to be around while we're filming tomorrow, aren't you, Mr. Shayne? Surely there won't be any more trouble while you're here."

Shayne shook his head. "I don't know exactly where I'll be," he said. "You hired me to investigate the murder and the other problems you've been having, not to act as a security guard."

"Of course. I just meant —"

"The best way to prevent any trouble in the future," Shayne said brusquely, "is to find the son of a bitch who's been causing it in the past. Good night, gentlemen."

HE LEFT THE BAR AND STARTED BACK toward his room, but as he passed the office, the screen door opened and a man stepped out to block his path. Shayne stopped and took in the newcomer calmly. The man was a couple of inches shorter than Shayne, but his broad shoulders loomed large in the shadows in front of the office. He wore a suit and a string tie, and a hat that would have looked more at home in Texas or New Mexico was pushed back on his bullet-shaped head. He said, "Are you Shayne?"

"What business is it of yours?" the redhead snapped back, not liking being accosted like this. He felt his muscles tensing for trouble.

"It's the business of the sheriff of this county, and since I work for him, it's my business, too. I'm Ralph Graner, the investigator in charge of the Olson case. Now, you gonna answer my question?"

"I'm Mike Shayne. Now, what's the rest of it, Graner? What's eating you?"

Graner pushed his coat back and rested his big hands on his hips. He said, "What's eating me is that some hotshot private eye from Miami thinks he can come in here to my territory and take over one of my cases. What have you got to say to that?"

If Graner was expecting his tough talk to make Shayne turn tail and run, he was severely disappointed. Shayne's lean face stretched into a grin, and he said mildly, "I won't interfere with your investigation, Deputy. I can promise you that. But if the producer of the movie wants

to hire me to look into some acts of sabotage that are slowing them down with their production, what's wrong with that?"

"You trying to say you're not investigating the murder of that stuntman fella?"

"I'm not saying a damn thing except that it's late at night and I'm tired. Even you ought to be able to understand a simple statement like that, Graner."

Shayne still had a smile on his face, but his tones had become more mocking. Graner's hands clenched into fists and he stepped closer to Shayne. His voice was low as he said, "You better understand right now, Shayne, that I'm not going to take any crap off of you, no matter what kind of rep you got in Miami or —"

There was going to be trouble, Shayne knew. Graner was spoiling for a fight, and he was going to keep prodding until he got one. How he had known that Shayne was in town and looking into the murder was not really that important; Shayne suspected that the night clerk in the office, who was peeking through the closed venetian blinds, was the deputy's source of information. The sheriff's department must be really baffled by this killing, Shayne thought fleetingly. The reaction of Graner to his presence was the reaction of a man who was having troubles that he couldn't contend with.

So even as Graner was barking in his face, leaning closer to him and trying to intimidate him with his presence, Shayne was heaving a mental sigh and getting ready for what might be a hell of a fight.

The scream that cut through the night changed everything.

IT WAS A TERRIFIED SHRIEK, and it came from somewhere close by. Graner broke off his sentence and whirled around, looking for the origin of the cry. Shayne brushed past him before the echo of the scream had died, running past the office and turning into the courtyard between the double rows of cabins.

The scream had come from one of them, Shayne was sure of that. As he charged down the gravel courtyard, he saw out of the corner of his eye that lights were coming on in several of the cabins. He was about halfway down to his own cabin when a door popped open on his right.

The motel sign had been turned off sometime when he was in the bar, and the courtyard was even darker now than before. Shayne saw the figure charging out through the open cabin door, though, silhouetted against the light inside. He spun in that direction, lunging toward the man who came running out into the night.

Shayne reached for the man's arm, grabbing it as the man tried to duck away from him. The man tore his arm loose, and Shayne sensed more than saw the fist coming at him. He jerked his head to the side, letting the blow graze along his ear.

Graner was running toward them, shouting, "Hey! What the hell is —" More doors were opening, and other people were calling out questions. Shayne was vaguely aware of the noises, but he was concentrating on his adversary and a struggle that had become suddenly intense.

Shayne hooked a punch to the belly of the man and took a hard fist to the sternum. The blow sent him staggering back a step, but the distance gave him room to launch a roundhouse right. It slammed into the man's jaw and knocked him backwards, but even in that moment of frenzied activity, Shayne suddenly sensed the wrongness about the man's face. It had seemed slick, even slippery, when he hit . . .

He didn't have time to wonder about it. He blocked another punch and tried a quick combination, peppering his opponent's torso with a left and a right. Shayne could sense the momentum of the fight beginning to turn his way, but then someone else stumbled against him.

Bony knuckles slammed into Shayne's chin as Graner howled a curse and tried to right himself. He had plowed right into Shayne in the darkness, and now he was falling, tangling himself in the long legs of the big redheaded investigator. Shayne managed to throw one more punch before he lost his own balance.

The blow landed solidly in the unknown man's face, and again Shayne felt that strange sensation of punching something other than human flesh. As he fell, his opponent took an unsteady step backwards and then used that motion to turn and start to sprint away from the scene. As he turned, light from an open door across the courtyard fell across the face that had puzzled Shayne.

Shayne was on the ground, trying to extricate himself from a sulfurously-cursing Graner, but what he saw made him freeze for a moment, staring incredulously at the fleeing man. That hesitation was enough to allow the man to disappear around the corner of a cabin, and Shayne knew how unlikely it was that they could catch up to him now. On a dark night like this, almost any kind of headstart was enough. That had been proven earlier when someone flung the knife at Shayne.

Shayne took a deep breath, pushed Graner away from him, and climbed to his feet. He trotted over to the place where the man had disappeared and stood listening and looking intently, but there was no sign of him now, no rustling in the brush or even a sign of its being disturbed.

Standing there in the shadows, Shayne took a deep breath and tried to slow down his pulse. It was racing and pounding in his ears, and it wasn't all from the exertion of the brief fight. No, what he had seen in that fleeting second of illumination was what had really caused a jumble of emotions to surge through him.

His opponent's face had felt wrong for a very good reason. It hadn't felt like human flesh, but it had been.

Only that flesh had been melting right off the face, so that Shayne could see patches of the white skull underneath

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A SHUDDER RAN THROUGH SHAYNE AS HE REMEMBERED what he had seen, but then he got a grip on himself and turned to walk quickly back into the courtyard. Graner met him, saying furiously, "What the hell do you think you're doing, Shayne? I would have had that man, whoever he was, if you hadn't butted in!"

Shayne threw the deputy a contemptuous look and brushed past him, not bothering to comment on Graner's distorted version of what had happened during the last few minutes. He was more interested in the cabin from which the man he had fought had emerged. Shayne stalked over to the still-open door. As he reached it, John Falcone came hurrying up out of the shadows. The director demanded, "What's going on, Shayne? Is there more trouble?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," Shayne bit off, stepping through the cabin door. He halted just inside and looked down at the motionless figure sprawled on the floor of the cabin next to the bed. Behind him, Falcone let out an alarmed exclamation.

Jenny Fontana was stretched out on the floor, and her face had a deathly pallor to it.

Shayne stepped forward quickly, kneeling beside Jenny and feeling for a pulse in her soft throat. He found it a second later, throbbing strongly against his fingertips. She had only fainted. Falcone came up behind Shayne and asked anxiously, "Is she . . . She's not"

"No, she's not dead," Shayne said. "It looks to me like she just fainted." Several other people were crowding into the room now, and without thinking about it, Shayne pulled Jenny's shirt closed. It had been gaping completely open. As he did so, she let out a low moan.

A second later, she sat up abruptly, another scream starting in her throat. Shayne grabbed her shoulders and snapped, "It's all right! It's all right, Miss Fontana. Remember me? I'm Mike Shayne."

The scream died away in a choking gurgle as she stared at him wide-

eyed. He repeated in a softer voice, "It's all right. No one's going to hurt you."

Falcone leaned over Shayne's shoulder and said, "Are you all right, Jenny? Are you hurt? My God, what happened?"

She shook her head, the mane of silky hair swinging from side to side. Her mouth worked, but no words came out. The terror that had caused her to faint still had her in its grip.

Graner pushed past the people standing around in the door and came up behind Shayne and Falcone. He growled, "All right, dammit, let me through. What the devil happened in here?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," Shayne said tightly. "Falcone, you get her other arm. Let's help her up onto the bed."

Jenny seemed grateful for their help as they lifted her up onto the soft mattress. She was trembling in a delayed reaction to whatever she had seen, and Shayne was pretty sure what it had been. He said, "Can you tell us about it yet, Miss Fontana?"

She shuddered again and mumbled, "I need a drink." It wasn't the plea of someone who was drunk, however, even though she had been drinking heavily earlier in the evening. It was the request of someone who was suddenly wishing they *were* drunk, instead of having to admit to being stone cold sober.

Barney McCluskey came out of the knot of people at the door and offered a flask that he took from an inside pocket. Shayne took it from him, unscrewed the cap and smelled the contents, and then passed it on to Jenny, who gripped it tightly in shaking hands. If McCluskey took offense at Shayne checking the contents, he didn't show it.

Jenny gulped down a healthy swallow of the whiskey, then Shayne gently pried the flask out of her fingers. He asked again, "Can you tell us what happened?"

He heard Graner behind him, muttering a complaint about a private investigator butting into his case, but no one was paying any attention to him. All eyes were on Jenny as she swallowed and said in a voice that was almost a whisper, "I . . . I unlocked my door and had just . . . just stepped inside. I turned the light on and then . . . God, I saw him then, going through my things . . ."

Shayne had already noted the disheveled state of the room. It appeared that someone had been searching through Jenny's belongings when the starlet discovered him.

"Who was it?" Shayne asked. "What did he look like?" He was sure he knew the answer to that second question, but he didn't want to put any words in her mouth or ideas in her head.

"It . . . it was awful. When he turned around . . . I was more fright-

ened than I've ever been before, even when I found poor Hal." Her voice was stronger now, but she still shivered as she went on, "It was like . . . like the man's face was just melting and running off. It really threw me for a second. I let out a scream, and then I seem to remember starting to fall down. I guess I just fainted."

Graner barked, "That's crazy! What kind of description is that? Sounds like some sort of monster!"

Falcone was frowning, Shayne saw. The director said, "Not a monster. It sounds like —"

"It was," Jenny cut in. "It was one of Marcus' masks."

Shayne looked at her sharply. "Marcus Van Horn?"

She nodded, and Falcone said, "That's right. He wears several fright masks during the course of the film, while he's trying to frighten Jenny. Or rather the character she plays. They sure as hell weren't meant to really put her into a faint!"

Shayne stepped away from the bed, his craggy red brows pulling down in a look of concentration. Without his even realizing it, his right hand reached up to pull gently on the lobe of his left ear. He looked at the group of people crowding around the cabin door, and his frown deepened.

Jenny's screams had drawn most of the cast and crew. But Marcus Van Horn was nowhere to be seen.

For that matter, Shayne noted, neither was Darren Frye.

HE WAS GLAD THAT FALCONE AND JENNY HAD COME UP with a reasonable explanation for the horrific appearance of the intruder. After going through a case several weeks earlier in which a belief in werewolves had played a vital part, Shayne sure as hell wasn't ready for monsters again. No, there had been a man under that awful-looking mask, and Shayne's gut feeling told him that whoever had worn the thing and grappled with him was also the same one who had stuck a knife in Hal Olson.

Shayne hadn't really gotten a good look at him in the shadows, except for that one brief moment. The man's clothes had been nondescript. As Shayne cast a hooded glance around the room, he knew that the man in the mask could have been almost any male member of the cast or crew. He could have easily circled around and discarded the mask somewhere in the brush, then come up to Jenny's cabin pretending to be one of the bystanders drawn by her outcry.

Van Horn and Frye seemed to be the only major members of the cast missing. Shayne didn't think that Van Horn could have given him

much of a fight, even as vital and healthy as the old actor was. Shayne wondered where Frye was, when the girl he seemed to be interested in was in danger

That question was answered almost right away. Darren Frye came shoving his way through the crowd, exclaiming, "Jenny! Are you all right? What happened?"

Everyone seemed to be asking those same questions. Jenny took the hand that Frye extended to her and squeezed it, saying, "I'm all right now, Darren. I was just scared. Someone was in here when I came in."

"Who was it?"

"That's one of the things we don't know," Falcone told him. "Whoever it was, though, he had on one of Marcus' masks. You know, the melting flesh job."

Jenny shuddered again at Falcone's description and held on tighter to Frye's hand. Shayne was watching the actor closely, and it seemed to him that Frye was slightly out of breath. As if he had been running

And Frye was a good-sized individual. He looked as if he could put up quite a tussle if he had to. If he was nearly caught doing something he shouldn't have been doing, in a place where he shouldn't have been, at least not for those purposes.

Shayne wasn't ready to convict him yet, though. There were still too many unanswered questions. He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and left it there unlit as he stepped over beside Graner.

The deputy was saying, "Can you tell if anything's missing, Miss Fontana?"

Jenny looked around the room. She must have been feeling stronger, because she stood up and took a closer look through her luggage. She shook her head and said to Graner, "I don't think so. I don't think he had a chance to take anything when I surprised him."

Shayne said quietly to Graner, "Don't you think you'd better take a look through the brush out back of the cabins. If that mask was a prop they're using in the movie, the guy probably wouldn't risk hanging onto it."

"I don't need a private snooper to tell me my job," Graner said testily. He paused for a moment, then said, "Still, you may have a point, Shayne. I'll go check on that, but don't you think you and I are through with our conversation. I still don't want you poking your nose into this." He stalked over to the door, shooing the onlookers away. "Go on back to your cabins! The excitement's over here." Before he went out, he looked back over his shoulder at Shayne and said, "And don't try interrogating anyone while I'm gone!"

SHAYNE GRINNED SARDONICALLY and flipped him a mocking salute. When Graner had left the cabin, Shayne turned to the four people who remained inside. Jenny had sat back down on the bed, and clustered around her were Frye, Falcone, and McCluskey.

"I don't give a damn what Graner says," Shayne told them, "I still want to know a couple of things. Miss Fontana, you came back here to your cabin alone?"

Jenny looked up at the three men surrounding her, and McCluskey said, "I think we should cooperate with Mr. Shayne, Jenny. Unless you think that fellow Graner has more on the ball than he appears to."

She nodded shakily. "You're right, Barney. Yes, Mr. Shayne, I was alone when I came back here from the bar." There was more spirit in her voice, a biting edge, as she went on, "Does that surprise you after all the stories you must have heard about our wanton Hollywood ways?"

"You can save the melodrama for your movies," Shayne said. "Do you remember who was in the bar when you left it?"

"You were still there," she came right back at him. "I saw you sitting there with John and Marcus and Barney. And Darren —"

"I was still shooting pool," Frye put in. Jenny didn't contradict him.

"Most of the crew were already gone," she said. She rattled off the names of several people she remembered as being still in the bar when she left, but none of them meant anything to Shayne yet. He had planned on trying to familiarize himself with everyone in the morning, but he hadn't counted on trouble popping up the same night he arrived at the location. He'd have to do quite a bit of legwork and studying the situation and its characters, as soon as he got the chance.

For now, though, he was interested in the haste with which Frye had claimed to still be in the bar when Jenny left. Shayne didn't know for sure himself whether or not the actor was telling the truth, since he had not been paying any attention to Frye when Jenny left. He had been getting ready to go back to his cabin himself.

He rubbed at his jaw for a moment as he considered the facts as he had them so far. Jenny had left the bar, and he had left as well, a few moments after her. Then he had run into Graner in front of the office, and that confrontation with the sheriff's man had taken several minutes. Shayne cast his memory back over what he had seen in the bar and realized that it had a back door, which was no surprise. If the intruder in the mask had been someone who had been in the bar when Shayne left, he could have slipped out that back way and cut through the brush to the rear of the cabins, then gone through one of the little carports between cabins to reach Jenny's door. If he moved quick

enough, he could have beaten Jenny going that way, even though Jenny left the bar first.

Of course, the man *could* have left the bar earlier, in which case the time angle wouldn't be nearly as crucial. Shayne didn't know what to think, yet.

But he *would* get the answers, sooner or later.

He was about to ask Falcone and McCluskey about what they had done after they left the bar, when the door opened again and Graner stepped through. He held up something in his hand and asked, "Is this it?"

Jenny stifled a scream, and the men around her bed shot hostile glances at the deputy. Graner was holding up a limp, latex mask, and Shayne could see now in the light from the ceiling fixture that the flesh only appeared to be melting. The globules of flesh were attached to the rest of the mask, which was also made to simulate parts of the skull showing through the plastic decaying flesh.

Graner repeated his question, and Jenny nodded her head, though she wouldn't look at the thing again. Even though she knew it was only a mask, Shayne suspected that she had been shaken by the experience enough so that she didn't want any reminders of it right now. He put in, "That's what I saw out there, all right. Where did you find it, Graner?"

"I don't have to share a damn bit of information with you, Shayne," Graner sneered. It didn't really matter, though; Shayne knew that the sheriff's investigator must have found the mask in the brush out back. He hadn't had time to check anywhere else. "I'll send it over to the lab for a fingerprint check," Graner went on. "Right now, I think I'll go have a little talk with Mr. Marcus Van Horn."

Shayne walked across the room, past Graner, pushing out through the door. He glanced back at Graner and said, "Mind if I tag along?"

He was hoping that Graner didn't know which cabin Van Horn was in, and sure enough, the deputy caught up with him just before he reached the office to check with the clerk. Graner said, "I told you, Shayne, I can handle this investigation myself. I don't want you bothering me while I'm talking to Van Horn."

Shayne's grey eyes were narrow. "How the hell do you know this has anything to do with your murder investigation?" he asked. "The way I see it, it's part of the malicious campaign to disrupt the filming, and that's my assignment."

"Dammit, you'll twist anything you can to your advantage, won't you, Shayne?"

Shayne grinned, lit the cigarette he had taken out several minutes

earlier, and didn't answer Graner's accusation.

IT TOOK ONLY A MOMENT TO GET VAN HORN'S CABIN number from the clerk, and then Shayne and Graner were striding back down the courtyard. Graner was seething at the way Shayne had insisted on coming along, but he was unwilling to cause any more trouble right now. He had more than he could handle as it was. Shayne was sure he had read the man right. Graner wasn't necessarily a bad man, but he was a man in over his head, and he wasn't handling that fact well.

Van Horn answered Graner's knock almost immediately, opening the door of his cabin and saying, "Ah, good evening, gentlemen. It's Mr. Graner, isn't it? You were the one from the sheriff's office, the one asking questions after the tragedy this afternoon."

"Yesterday afternoon, now," Graner said. He was still carrying the mask, using a pen to support it so that he wouldn't have to handle it and risk ruining any prints on it. "This is yours, isn't it?"

"Why, yes, it is. Where did you get it? It's not supposed to be taken out of the property trunk, you know."

Shayne said, "You could get it whenever you wanted, though, couldn't you, Mr. Van Horn?"

"Well, of course. What's this all about, Mr. Shayne?"

"Didn't you hear the screams?" Graner snapped.

Van Horn nodded. "I did. I had just started back to my cabin from the cafe. When I saw the crowd around Jenny's door, I was afraid something had happened to the poor girl. One of the crew checked on her for me, though, and said she was all right, that she had surprised a prowler but that she had plenty of help with her. I didn't want to get in the way, so I came back here. Did you catch the prowler, gentlemen? And you can reassure me that Jenny is indeed all right."

Graner started to say something, but Shayne overrode him. "She's fine. She just got scared and fainted. The guy who scared her got away, though."

"And he was wearing this," Graner added, holding the mask up again. "What have you got to say about that, Van Horn?"

The deputy's tough tones took Van Horn aback. He frowned and replied, "What can I say, sir? It most certainly wasn't I who was skulking around Jenny's room!"

"Who else could have gotten this ugly thing?" Graner demanded.

Van Horn shook his head. "Any number of people. The property trunk isn't kept locked, though it is in the production office, which is locked when no one is using it. But I would imagine that almost anyone

connected with the film could have gotten his hands on that mask. We haven't used it for several days, and we won't be for several more."

"That's the truth," Graner grunted. "It's evidence now."

Shayne had been silent during most of the interview, but now he asked, "Just where is this production office?"

"The two cabins next to Mr. Falcone's," Van Horn answered. "The first one is where the property trunk is kept and where the paperwork is done, and we've converted the other one into a screening room for the rushes."

"Rushes?" Shayne was vaguely familiar with the word but wasn't totally sure of its meaning.

"The day's film," Van Horn explained. "It's still exactly as it was shot, with no editing and all the extraneous material left in, but the director must go over it every night, so that he can catch any mistakes made during the day's shooting. Very important part of it. One of our problems earlier was that some film was lost between here and the laboratory in Miami where it was processed. There was more than one copy made, of course, so the day's work wasn't lost, but it threw John off, not having the rushes until the next day. Usually, we get them back within a few hours of wrapping for the day."

Shayne was more interested in that property trunk. He was amazed at the amount of confusion involved in making a movie. It looked like no one kept up with anything. The way everyone told it, almost anyone could have slipped into Jenny's dressing room and killed Olson, and almost anyone could have swiped the mask from the property trunk to protect his identity as he rifled Jenny's cabin at the motel.

What was it about Jenny Fontana, Shayne wondered, that made trouble seem to turn up close to her?

Graner was heading toward the door. "No need to tell you or the others to stick around," he said. "You won't be going anywhere until that damn movie of yours is finished. Just don't think you slick bastards are going to put anything over on me." The door slammed behind him on his way out.

"Bloody unpleasant fellow, isn't he?" Van Horn said, anger coming through in his voice. He took a deep breath, controlled himself with a visible effort.

"He is, at that," Shayne agreed. "I just hope he's got enough sense to put a guard over Jenny Fontana. She seems to be drawing trouble to her."

"Our Jenny is a magnet for all sorts of things." The familiar cultured tones were back in Van Horn's voice. "I trust you'll be keeping an eye on her, Mr. Shayne."

"Damn right. Graner's a plodder. He might get to the truth eventually, but I hope we don't have to rely on that."

Van Horn clapped him on the shoulder. "We won't," he declared. "Not with Mike Shayne on the case."

Shayne's mouth quirked. Either this old man had all the confidence in the world in him . . . or he was trying to set him up for something.

Either way, it was an uncomfortable feeling.

VI

AFTER ALL THAT HAD HAPPENED in the relatively brief time since his arrival in the little town of Norwood, Shayne found he wasn't quite ready to go back to his cabin and go to sleep just yet. When he left Marcus Van Horn's cabin, he turned his steps back toward the bar on the other side of the office, hoping the place was still open.

It was, though it was considerably less crowded now than when Shayne left it earlier. The lateness of the hour, and especially all the commotion caused by the intruder in Jenny's cabin, had drawn all the patrons away.

Almost all of them, Shayne saw. There were a few people still sitting at the far end of the bar, and one man occupied a table in the corner. As Shayne stepped into the room, this man caught his eye and raised a hand, calling him over. Shayne recalled seeing him in the bar earlier, and in the crowd around the door of Jenny's cabin, but he hadn't been introduced to him yet.

"Mr. Shayne," the man said as Shayne walked over. He stood up and stuck out a big, work-roughened hand. "I'm Jack Crosland. I heard from Mr. McCluskey that you were coming out here to lend us a hand. Lord knows we can use it."

Shayne shook hands with Crosland and then took the chair the man offered. Crosland went on, "Buy you a drink? Things are pretty dead around here right now, I don't think service will be a problem."

There was a nearly-empty glass in front of Crosland, and to judge by the man's breath and general demeanor, he had emptied it quite a few times during the course of the evening. Shayne said, "Thanks. Martell if they've got it, beer if they don't."

"Be right back." Crosland tossed down the rest of his own drink and took the glass with him to the bar to get it refilled. He returned with cognac for Shayne and sat down again, moving with the careful grace that some people exhibit under the influence. He was a tall man, with a strong, husky build and a slightly-lined face that was still handsome.

Shayne lifted the glass of Martell in salute, sipped at it gratefully,

then said, "Are you one of the cast of this epic, Mr. Crosland?"

"Make it Jack. Hell, no I'm no actor. I'm the stunt coordinator. This is a picture with a lot of gags in it, so I've got my hands full. Hal getting killed like that just made my job that much harder."

"He probably didn't care much for the experience, either."

Crosland shook his head. "Don't get me wrong, Mr. Shayne. I was really shook up when Jenny found Hal's body. You've got to understand something about stuntmen, though. We're like . . . like a fraternity, almost. All the guys on my crew, they're not just employees. They're more like my brothers. We live with danger all the time, though, so I guess death isn't as awesome for us as it is for most people." He threw his head back and swallowed his drink again. "It's all planned and orchestrated down to the last detail, but hell, when you come down to it, if the gags weren't dangerous, then all the stuntmen in the world would be out of work, right?"

"Right," Shayne agreed, content for the moment to let Crosland do the talking. The man probably really was upset about everything that had happened; that would explain his drinking and his seeming urge to talk.

"So you see, Hal's death really hit me hard. This has been a real bastard of a shoot anyway, without that happening." Crosland stared down into his glass, empty again. "What a life, Mr. Shayne. No real family, not many friends, just your work to keep you going. Then you get a little older, and the body just won't do everything you ask it to anymore, so you start putting other bodies through their paces. I can be a damn good stunt coordinator, Mr. Shayne, if I just get a chance. But if we keep having all this bad luck . . . Well, I just don't know. I just don't know anymore."

Shayne sighed as Crosland's speech meandered on. If the man was going to get maudlin, Shayne didn't want to hear it. He was about to finish off his drink and leave the bar, when Crosland said, "Of course, it might have been easier to take if Hal had bought it during a gag. Then he would've gone while he was doing the work he loved. The way it was, though . . ." Crosland shook his head dispiritedly.

"Murder's always a bad business," Shayne said.

"Especially when it's over a —" Crosland broke off, shaking his head again.

SHAYNE TRIED TO KEEP THE SUDDEN INTEREST from jumping out on his face. This was the first time anyone had even intimated that they knew why Olson was killed, other than the speculation that it was part of the campaign to sabotage the movie. Shayne had never

fully bought that theory, but so far no one had offered anything else. Now he said casually, glad that he still had some of the cognac to nurse, "Over what?"

"Hell, I shouldn't be talking," Crosland muttered. Shayne kept silent for a moment, gauging the best moment to prod him again. He didn't have to. Crosland looked up suddenly and went on, "I just hate to think that Hal got killed over a woman, even a damn nice-looking one like that."

"You're talking about Jenny Fontana," Shayne guessed.

"Who else? Shoot, she had every man within a hundred miles panting after her, and she knew it."

"Does that include you?" Shayne asked.

Crosland smiled slightly. "I can appreciate a beautiful woman just as well as the next fellow, Mr. Shayne, but I knew better than to try anything with Jenny. She's got too many boyfriends already; I'm just surprised there hasn't been trouble over her before. I knew to stay away from her. I guess Hal didn't."

Shayne watched Crosland intently, his grey eyes locking with the man's brown ones. He wanted the cards put on the table now. "You're saying that there was something between Jenny Fontana and Olson, and that someone else who's interested in her killed Olson because of it?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. And if I could prove it, I'd love to watch that son of a bitch hang for it, too."

"Who are you talking about?" Shayne asked tightly.

Anger seemed to have sobered Crosland some. His voice wasn't shaky or maudlin at all as he said, "It's kind of funny, them looking alike and all, and Hal even doubling for him. But it's Darren Frye I'm talking about, Mr. Shayne. He's the one who killed Hal. I'd stake my life on it!"

Shayne took a deep breath. "But you can't prove it? You're just going on a hunch, and the knowledge that Olson and Fontana were involved?"

Crosland shrugged. "Like I said, I'd like nothing better than to prove it. But there's no way I can. All I know is that they had a few harsh words in the past, and I wasn't around either one of them about the time Hal was getting killed. That may not sound like much in the way of evidence to a pro like you, Mr. Shayne, but I tell you one thing. In my business, you learn to trust your gut, and my gut tells me Darren Frye is a murderer."

"I know about gut feelings," Shayne said softly. Crosland's words couldn't help but carry some weight, since he had known Hal Olson

well and also knew all the other principals. And from what Shayne had seen and heard of stuntmen, he had respect for the breed. They were hard-living people, used to danger, and deep down, most of them were loners to a certain extent.

And that was a description that fit private eyes pretty well, too.

"Maybe we'll see what we can do about finding some evidence," he said. "Thanks for talking to me, Crosland. At least now while I'm keeping my eyes open, I'll have some idea of what I'm looking for."

"Glad to hear it," Crosland said. "If anybody can catch the bastard, you're the guy to do it, Mr. Shayne. You watch him; he'll trip up somewhere, you can count on it."

Shayne stood up, and Crosland tried to follow suit. He paused halfway up, though, and caught himself on the table. He swallowed and shook his head. "Little too much to drink," he said wearily. "This has been a hell of a day, though."

Shayne took his arm and helped support him. "Come on, I'll help you back to your cabin."

"Thanks. Guess I'm just not as young as I used to be."

They left the bar, Shayne's hand still on Crosland's arm to steady him, and made their way back around the office to the courtyard. Shayne was grateful that Crosland wasn't a singing drunk and that he wasn't feeling sorry for himself again. As they walked down the courtyard between the rows of cabins, he saw that lights were on in Falcone's cabin, in McCluskey's, in Van Horn's, and in Jenny Fontana's. All the others were dark. There was no sign of Ralph Graner around, and Shayne supposed he had left to take the fright mask over to the state police lab, as he had said he was going to.

Crosland turned toward a cabin on the left, three doors away from Shayne's own cabin, and said, "This is it. Thanks again for the hand."

"Forget it," Shayne said.

"You watch Frye close," Crosland went on as he unlocked his door and opened it. "You get the goods on him."

"If they're there to be got," Shayne promised.

Crosland said good night and closed his door, and instead of turning toward his own cabin, Shayne walked briskly back toward the front of the courtyard, crossing over to knock on Jenny Fontana's door.

HE WASN'T SURPRISED WHEN IT WAS JERKED OPEN a second later by Darren Frye. The interior of the cabin was dimly lit, and as Shayne peered past Frye's large form, he could see a shape under the covers of the bed.

"What the hell do you want?" Frye demanded.

"Just checking on Miss Fontana," Shayne returned.

"She's finally gotten settled down and gone to sleep," Frye said. "No thanks to you and all your questions, Shayne. Can't you leave us alone now?"

A sudden worry went through Shayne. If Crosland was right and Frye had killed Olson out of jealousy over Jenny, then Jenny herself might not be safe alone with Frye. He took a step forward, ready to bull his way into the room if necessary, when he saw Jenny sit up slowly in bed. She seemed groggy with sleep, and she was slow in pulling the sheet up to cover her bare torso. She called out to Frye in a sleepy voice, "Who is it, Darren? What's going on?"

Frye half-turned toward her and said, "Nothing, just that pest Sh —"

"Just checking on you, Miss Fontana," Shayne overrode him. "Any more trouble?"

Jenny shook her head. "Oh, no. I'm sure I'll be all right now. Darren's going to take care of me tonight."

"Yeah, we're fine, Shayne. So take off, all right?"

Shayne nodded slowly. "Sure, whatever you say. Good night, Miss Fontana." He turned and walked away from the cabin as Frye shut the door forcefully.

He was getting a little tired, since it was well after midnight by now. He had been in the office in Miami all day, then had the long drive out here during the evening, and things hadn't really slowed down much since he arrived. Still, there was one more thing he wanted to do, now that he knew Frye was spending the night in Jenny's cabin.

When he and Graner had been getting the number of Van Horn's cabin from the office, it hadn't been hard to get a look at the other cabin assignments, either. For example, he knew that Frye was staying in the last cabin on the right, directly across from the room Shayne had been given.

And Shayne suspected that the locks on this small-time motel hadn't been designed to keep out a knowledgeable professional.

He was right. Thirty seconds work with the ring of keys he always carried had him inside Frye's cabin.

SHAYNE CLOSED THE DOOR SOFTLY BEHIND HIM and stood still in the darkness. When three minutes had passed with no sign that anyone else was there, he slipped a small penlight out of his pocket and flicked it on, casting the shaded beam around the room.

The place was small, and searching it took only a few minutes. There was nothing incriminating in the place, but then Shayne hadn't ex-

pected to find any damning evidence. The knife that had killed Olson was in the hands of the police, as was the mask worn by the intruder in Jenny's cabin. Shayne had already established that almost anyone could have gotten hold of the mask, and from what he had been told by Rourke and McCluskey, the knife had been an ordinary one, easily picked up in a variety of places, and no one on the scene had recognized it.

No, he thought, concrete evidence in this case seemed to be at a premium. What he had instead was a colorful mixture of characters, all of them used to leading life in the fast lane, all of them probably used to giving free vent to their emotions and passions. And behind that was the driving specter of money, the need to get the picture done on time and under budget. While he was inclined to believe that Crosland had something with his theory about Olson, Frye, and Jenny, he knew that couldn't ignore the fact that there might be a myriad of motives that he hadn't come across yet.

Shayne slipped out of the room as quietly as he had entered it, relocking the door behind him. As he crossed the courtyard to his own cabin at last, he reflected on what the next day might bring. It wouldn't be many hours until the early morning call, in fact. He would just have to do without as many hours of sleep as he would have liked, but he was used to that. Regular hours were one thing that private investigators learned to get along without. Or maybe they didn't want them in the first place.

Thrusting his room key in the lock, Shayne started to open the door, ready to sink onto the bed as soon as he could get his clothes off. He pushed the panel back.

Something thudded into it.

Instinct took over. Shayne threw himself forward, diving into the room. He rolled in the darkness, coming up with his gun even as his foot kicked the door closed behind him. As he glanced at the door, he saw faint light coming in through the hole that the bullet had made.

Shayne flicked the curtain over the window back a fraction of an inch and peered out, gripping his pistol tightly. There was no sign of life in the courtyard outside, nothing out of the ordinary. He could see that the dim light was still burning in Jenny Fontana's cabin.

Had Frye seen him going into his cabin and decided that Shayne was too big a threat? Entirely possible, Shayne decided. The man certainly seemed suspicious enough to have watched Shayne after he left Jenny's cabin. Shayne had been halfway hoping to lure Frye after him, in fact. Now it looked like the actor had taken the bait.

There had been no sound of a shot, which meant a silenced gun.

Jenny Fontana had seemed to be sedated, and she might have slept right through Frye firing at Shayne. All it would have taken was Frye waiting until Shayne went back to his own cabin, then cracking the door of Jenny's cabin an inch or so

No more shots came from across the courtyard. Shayne locked his door and kept his gun in his hand as he sprawled out on the bed, still fully dressed. When morning came, he could make a rough estimate of the bullet's trajectory. If it had indeed come from the direction of Jenny's cabin, that would be the final piece of proof he needed to be convinced of Frye's guilt. But getting enough evidence to convince the authorities might be another matter entirely.

Shayne knew one thing. When Falcone had the cameras rolling again, there was going to be a big redheaded shamus on the scene. And if the motel tried to charge him for the bullet hole in the door, well, that was just one more item that would go on Barney McCluskey's bill.

VII

"CUT!" FALCONE YELLED.

There was anger in his voice. He bounded up out of his chair and hurried over to one of the cameramen, who was crouched behind his equipment looking disgusted.

"What the hell happened, Carl?" Falcone demanded of the man. "That camera nearly fell over!"

"Damn thing's broken, boss," the cameraman said. "This base is cracked. I don't understand it. It was all right yesterday."

Shayne was standing about fifteen feet away, but he could hear the exchange clearly. Another incident to slow the production down, he thought. As Falcone, Carl, and several of the other technicians gathered around the heavy, bulky camera and started examining it, Shayne strolled over toward Barney McCluskey. The producer was watching the goings-on anxiously, and as usual when trouble cropped up, sweat was running down his face and soaking his collar.

They were inside the huge old house where the interior shots of *Mansion of Blood* were being filmed, and if Shayne understood what was going on correctly, Falcone was shooting one scene with six different cameras. The set-up required that Jenny run down several flights of stairs, fleeing the deranged Van Horn, trying to avoid him and the death traps he had set up for her. The big camera that had malfunctioned as it moved around on its motorized base was shooting the master shot, and the film from five hand-held cameras at different

locations along Jenny's route would be edited into the master shot later.

Shayne said to McCluskey, "It looks like your bad luck just won't quit."

McCluskey cursed, but there was a defeated sound to his voice, rather than defiance. "You know the old song about how if I didn't have bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all? This movie is living proof of it, pal."

"What happens if Falcone and the crew don't get that camera fixed?"

"We lose this shot. No point in doing it if we don't have the master. And we spent three hours setting it up. Only three hours." He was disgusted. "Three hours closer to going over budget, that's what it is. It doesn't seem like much time until you multiply it by all the other problems we've had. And that camera's not ours, either; it's leased, and the leasing company won't like it when they find out it got busted."

Shayne watched as Falcone threw up his hands and called out, "Forget it for this shot, people! Take a break while we figure out what to do next."

The director hurried over toward McCluskey and Shayne, scowling. He said to McCluskey, "Can you beat that, Barney? The morning's wasted now. We might as well call lunch and then try to get some of the stunt work done this afternoon."

"You've still got some cutaways to shoot, too, don't you?"

Falcone nodded. "We can keep busy. If we don't get some of these big scenes done soon, though, we'll never catch up."

"I know," McCluskey said, sighing. "Don't think I don't."

SHAYNE WANDERED AWAY FROM THEM, lighting a cigarette and watching the cast and crew as they stood around in small groups, talking. There wasn't much else for them to do at the moment. Shayne stopped and exchanged a few words with Marcus Van Horn, waved at Jack Crosland as the stunt coordinator hurried through the house, and watched closely as Jenny Fontana and Darren Frye conversed with each other in low tones. Frye must have felt the pressure of Shayne's gaze, because he looked up, let a flash of anger go over his features, then looked away quickly.

A smile quirked at the corners of Shayne's wide mouth. He had found the bullet that had been fired at him the night before as soon as it got light enough to see in his cabin. It was buried in the plaster of a wall, and as Shayne lined it up with the hole in the door, he had

known what he would find. The shot had indeed come from the direction of Jenny's cabin. And that's where Frye had been at the time of the attack.

Shayne wanted that silencer. There had to be one. By itself, it wouldn't be enough to convict Frye of anything except possibly possessing it unlawfully, but Shayne thought it would serve as a lever to pry out the real proof of Frye's guilt. He had called Graner and talked to the sheriff's investigator briefly without telling him what he had, and Graner had said he would be back out at the location later on in the afternoon. Shayne had also asked Graner about the lab report on the mask, but Graner hadn't told him a thing. Shayne suspected from the man's attitude, though, that the lab hadn't turned up anything. If he had something concrete, Graner wouldn't pass up the chance to gloat about it, Shayne was sure.

Shayne hoped to have the whole thing wrapped up by the time Graner arrived again, but if he didn't, he was prepared to give what he had to the sheriff's office. They could put more pressure on Frye, and Shayne didn't think the actor could stand up to a grilling for very long. He hoped it wouldn't come to that, though.

Sleep had eluded Shayne most of the night after the sniping, but that had given him a chance to do some thinking about the case. And while he was pretty well convinced of Frye's guilt, he had learned over the years that it was important to check out any suspicions, to try to answer all the questions that you could think of. So he waited until Falcone had left Barney McCluskey's side and walked back over to the producer.

"Can we talk in private for a few minutes?" Shayne asked.

"You've got an idea who's behind the trouble?" McCluskey returned, hope and desperation mixing in his voice.

"I've got a few questions I'd still like answered," Shayne said. "I like to have all the loose ends cleared up before I commit myself to anything."

McCluskey took his arm. "Sure. Let's go outside."

They walked out onto the wide verandah that ran along the front of the house, and Shayne leaned against one of the pillars that supported the roof above them. Casting his eyes around, he saw that there was no one else within earshot.

"You may not want to answer this," he began, "but it's something I want to know. Who's putting up the money for this film?"

"It's an independent film, but we're going to get one of the major companies to distribute —"

"I didn't ask who was going to distribute it," Shayne said bluntly. "I want to know who's meeting the payroll."

McCluskey looked puzzled. "I don't see what that's got to —"

"Listen," Shayne interrupted him. "I've got an idea who killed Hal Olson. But his murder isn't necessarily connected with the sabotage that's been going on all along. I assume you wanted both cases cleared up if I can do it. So tell me who the money men are behind this little thriller."

McCluskey hemmed and hawed for a few moments, but Shayne kept after him, and finally the man from Hollywood snapped, "All right, all right. If it's that important, I don't guess it'll hurt to tell you. Remember, though, we're trying to keep this quiet. We're talking about a money man, singular, not plural. The guy's putting damn near everything he's got into this film, and if it goes much over the budget, or if it doesn't get made at all, he's going to be ruined. Some people would like to see that happen, if you get my drift."

Shayne snapped a match into life and held it to the end of a cigarette. When he had it going, he said, "I've heard a lot of rumors about Mark Fontana's former gangland connections. I guess they were all true. The mob didn't like it when he told them to kiss off. They'd love to see his little girl's first big movie go down the drain, especially when Fontana himself is backing it."

McCluskey looked at him for a long moment, then said, "Why the hell did you give me the high-pressure job when you already had it all figured out? Did you know all along that Fontana is financing the picture?"

Shayne shook his head. "I never really thought about it until last night. I had a lot of time to think about things, because I didn't feel much like sleeping after somebody took a shot at me."

McCluskey gaped. "Somebody . . . took a shot . . .?"

"That's right. They missed, though, and that's the important thing. That and the fact that I think I know who did it. It was the same man who killed Olson and broke into Jenny's cabin last night."

"But who —"

"You'll find out when I've got proof," Shayne told him flatly. "Graner will be back out here late this afternoon. I'm going to have him get a search warrant, and we'll tear this whole place apart until we find what we need, if we have to." Shayne wasn't at all sure that Graner would be as cooperative as he made it sound, but with any luck, Shayne wouldn't need Graner's help.

McCluskey was still full of questions, but Shayne dodged all of them and cautioned the producer not to mention anything that Shayne had told him. He left McCluskey on the porch, muttering to himself.

Shayne wasn't sure that McCluskey would keep quiet about what he

had been told, but it really didn't matter. If the word spread that Shayne had a suspect and was going to get a search warrant, that might provoke the killer into making a hasty move. And if that happened, Shayne would be ready.

THE AFTERNOON PASSED FAIRLY UNEVENTFULLY. Falcone shot several more scenes, but Shayne watched only the ones with Darren Frye in them. He wasn't going to let Frye out of his sight now, not until Graner arrived.

Falcone called a halt to the day's shooting around four o'clock and sent the film off immediately to Miami for processing. The messenger would be back with it in about three hours, if there were no problems.

Frye had been avoiding Shayne all day, with the exception of some very hostile glances. Shayne grinned mockingly back at him, but Frye refused to be goaded.

The bar was crowded, as usual, when Shayne followed Frye and Jenny inside. They got drinks and began to play pool again, and Shayne joined Marcus Van Horn and McCluskey at a table. Van Horn was saying, "I certainly hope things go a bit smoother tomorrow. What a dreadful day."

"Yeah, we lost some time again," McCluskey agreed. "Hell, many more weeks like this one, and we're finished."

"Do you know if they've gotten the bugs out of Horace yet?"

Shayne lifted his eyebrows and asked, "Who's Horace?"

"Our giant alligator," McCluskey said. "You haven't seen him yet, because he's been broken down. I've had technicians working on him almost around the clock, but it's not easy fixing a big mechanical alligator."

Shayne couldn't argue with the logic of that statement, so he kept his mouth shut and watched Frye shoot pool coldly and expressionlessly. He couldn't help but remember the way Frye had gripped the cue the night before, during their first brief confrontation. He had looked like he wanted to take Shayne's head off with it . . .

Everyone had gone through several drinks and the place was getting smoky and noisy when Falcone came in. He cut across the room to the table where Shayne, McCluskey, and Van Horn were sitting. He said, "The dailies are back. Want to take a look with me, Barney, and see how little we got done today?"

"Sure," McCluskey said. "As long as what we got is good, the day wasn't a total loss." He stood up and turned to Shayne. "Care to come along and watch the rushes with us, Mr. Shayne? Might be an interesting experience if you've never seen dailies before."

McCluskey had been trying to pump him subtly about what had been said between them earlier, and Shayne knew he wanted to continue in that vein. Maybe he thought that if he got Shayne alone again, he could convince him to name the killer. Shayne wasn't sure he wanted to put up with that, but on the other hand, Graner had never shown up, and Shayne was losing patience with the sheriff's man. If Graner wanted this whole case blown wide open, Shayne just might have to accommodate him.

He got up. "I'd like to see them," he said. "Might give me a better idea of how you put a movie together."

"Come on, then," Falcone said. He didn't look too happy with the prospect of having Shayne with them in the screening room, but he wasn't going to cause any trouble about it. They had enough problems already.

THE MAKESHIFT SCREENING ROOM IN THE MOTEL CABIN was crude, basically just a big screen and a projector. Shayne and McCluskey sat in armchairs while Falcone got the projector going.

The first shots he saw didn't make much sense to Shayne. They were all close-ups of various faces and objects, with little if any dialogue. McCluskey explained in a low voice that they were called cutaway shots and reaction shots and were used basically for transitions within the film. Each shot was preceded by the clapboard showing the identifying information on the shot. Shayne watched the procession of shots and was glad that it was Falcone who had to make sense of them and not him.

When the cutaways were over, the next scene involved Darren Frye. It was a series of long shots, showing Frye running through the swamp, leaping over fallen logs, dodging snakes and alligators, and fighting with Van Horn. Shayne watched the scene for a moment; his brow furrowing, then he sat up and said abruptly, "I don't remember seeing that being filmed today."

"Well, it was," Falcone said shortly. "We did it about the middle of the afternoon."

"But I was watching Frye all afternoon. I didn't let him out of my sight, and I didn't see any of that."

"It's Frye who's your suspect!" McCluskey exclaimed. "You think he killed Olson! Why else would you be watching him?"

"You can suspect whoever you damn well please," Falcone put in before Shayne had a chance to respond. "But that's not Frye you're watching up there, Shayne. That's Jack Crosland doubling for him."

"I thought Olson was Frye's double."

Falcone shrugged. "He was. But you do what you can with what you've got. If you were knowledgeable about motion pictures, you'd know that we used even longer shots than usual in that scene. With Hal gone, somebody has to double Frye." He snorted and went on, "You can't expect Frye to do his own stunts, even the non-dangerous ones. Jack's about the right size, even though he and Frye don't look at all alike. With a wig, though, and a fake moustache, Jack can pass for him as long as you don't get too close."

Shayne was watching Crosland going through his paces on screen, pretending to be Frye, who was only pretending himself when he was on screen. It was all pretend, make-believe, but at the same time, it had the illusion of reality. Disbelief was suspended readily and the world on the screen really did extend beyond the borders of the camera lens, if only for a few moments. Shayne thought about it, tugging insistently now on his ear, and he realized that all these movie people were masters at making people believe things that were patently absurd.

But murder was something else again. Murder was real, as real as you could get. Hal Olson hadn't gotten up and washed the blood off and gone about his business. And if that shot had connected the night before, Mike Shayne would be only a memory now.

Shayne's jaw clenched. If murder was real, so were murderers.

And now, whether Graner had ever shown up or not, Shayne had a date with one.

VIII

AGAIN, IT WAS EASY TO GET PAST THE LOCK on the door of the cabin he wanted. Shayne hoped that he would have an uninterrupted few minutes to search the place. From the generally deserted look of the cabins, it appeared that nearly everyone was over at the bar, and that was fine with him, if only it would stay that way. He knew that Falcone and McCluskey were puzzled at his sudden departure from the screening room, but he hadn't wanted to take the time to explain.

He had no proof of the new theory that had presented itself to him as he watched the rushes, but he thought he would find it here in this cabin. Graner hadn't been anywhere around, but that was all right with Shayne. If the sheriff's office had been in charge of things, he would have had to wait for a search warrant. This way, he could skirt the law a little bit and find what he was looking for first.

The sun had just gone down, so there was still some light filtering into the cabin, enough for Shayne to see by as he went through the

luggage he found and the clothes that were in the closet. It was in a duffel bag full of dirty clothes that he found what he sought — a thick envelope wrapped in a shirt, and a long, hard shape rolled up in a pair of socks. When he opened the envelope, he had to repress a whistle. There was an inch-thick wad of bills inside. Shayne's blunt thumb riffled the money. He guessed there were at least twenty-five thousand dollars there. Wrecking *Mansion of Blood* was a job that paid well. But the old enemies of Mark Fontana had plenty of money to spend, especially when it came to avenging what they viewed as an act of treason, Fontana's flight out from under their wing.

It was the thing in the sock that really clenched it, though. Shayne let the silencer roll out into the palm of his hand and hefted the weight of it with a grim look on his face. It all fit now, and his theory had been right, even though he took no great pride in that fact.

He heard the cabin door creak.

Shayne started to spin around from his crouching position just inside the closet, but the deadly calm tone of Jack Crosland's voice made him freeze. "Dammit, Shayne," Crosland said, "why did you have to come snooping here?"

SHAYNE LOOKED OVER HIS SHOULDER and saw Crosland closing the door behind him, his other hand holding the gun that no doubt went with the silencer. Staying where he was, Shayne said, "I just realized that movie-making is all make-believe, Crosland. Make-believe is all you people know. So you can fool other people because you fool yourselves."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You should have gotten rid of the silencer."

Crosland shook his head. "That doesn't prove a thing. I'm clean, Shayne."

"What about the money in the envelope? Is that clean, too? Or is it dirty money that's paying you to ruin this film so a bunch of bitter old men can have a laugh at Mark Fontana's expense?"

There were beads of sweat on Crosland's brow, but the gun in his hand stayed steady. "What do you know about Fontana, Shayne? This whole damn thing is really none of your business, you know? It's between some people you've never even met."

"It may be an old hate, but it got Hal Olson killed, didn't it? Just because he stumbled over the fact that you were the one who was causing all the so-called bad luck. He was going to tell Jenny Fontana about it, so you decided to knock him off before he could. Then you had to find out if he had managed to get some word, some piece of in-

criminating evidence, to Jenny herself, so you swiped one of Van Horn's masks and broke into her cabin. We mixed it up outside, but you got away, threw the mask away in the brush, and slipped back inside the bar. You're pretty slick, Crosland, I'll give you that. You handled most of it like a pro, didn't leave any prints or anything. But you should have left it like that and not tried to manipulate me and frame Darren Frye."

Crosland grinned, and it wasn't a pretty sight. His eyes were too bleak for that. "Hell, I don't know what you're talking about, Shayne. All I know is that I came back to my room and found a prowler there, and I shot him when he came at me. How was I to know it was you? Besides, you broke in here, and you didn't have any right to do that. It may be a little rough on me for killing you, but not like a murder rap."

Shayne's kneeling position was getting awfully cramped and uncomfortable, but he wasn't ready to move yet. He just hoped his muscles wouldn't be too stiff when the time came. He said, "You're still trying to play it too cute, Crosland, making things too complicated for you to control. I bought your phony story about a love triangle between Olson, Frye, and Jenny for a while, but no cop in his right mind is going to accept a fairy tale about shooting a prowler. You'd be better off just giving it up."

Crosland shook his head. He said savagely. "Not a chance! I'm not giving up the best thing that's ever happened to me, Shayne. They're paying me enough that I can retire and get away from stunt work completely. I never had anything except my gags before, and now that I can reach out and grab everything else, no private eye is going to stand in the way. You better stand up now."

Straightening up slowly, Shayne said, "What happened last night? You practically begged me to search Frye's cabin, but there was nothing there. You must not have counted on me getting around to it so soon, before you had a chance to plant anything. Some phony love letters maybe, threatening to kill Olson if Jenny didn't stop seeing him? Of course, it would have all been a lie, but that doesn't bother you, does it?" Shayne laughed shortly. "And you told me last night that you're no actor!"

Crosland took a deep breath. "Well, Shayne, you're a pretty smart fellow. And I like you. But this thing's just gone too far now for you to ruin it for me. It's like a lot of stunts I've done. Going ahead with them may be dangerous, but trying to back out will kill you for sure. I am sorry, though."

His finger tightened on the trigger.

SHAYNE DID THE ONLY THING HE COULD.

He threw the silencer at Crosland's head as hard as he could and dove forward in a full-tilt lunge.

The gun cracked as Crosland instinctively dodged the missile coming at his face. Shayne felt the bullet pluck at his left shoulder, and then he was barreling into Crosland's legs, knocking him off his feet and sending him sprawling.

There was wetness leaking down Shayne's shoulder as he hit the floor and rolled, grasping desperately for Crosland. His fingers fastened on the man's wrist and kept the gun pointed the other way, but in these awkward, close quarters, he couldn't do much of anything else. There wasn't room, rolling around down here on the floor, to throw a good punch.

Crosland suddenly ripped his gun hand free with a surge of unexpected strength, but instead of firing, he whipped the pistol around in a short but savage arc. Its barrel cracked against Shayne's temple, sending great goutts of darkness pulsing through his brain. He tried to hold on to Crosland and failed.

The stuntman was up on his feet now, darting toward the door. The shot would bring other people, and now there was no way he could put over a fake story about shooting an unknown prowler only to discover it was Mike Shayne. Instead, he slammed the door of the cabin open and raced through it.

Shayne was on his feet and out the door in time to see a car with Crosland at the wheel turning onto the road to the mansion and racing off in a cloud of dust. Clutching at his wounded shoulder and trying to figure out why Crosland hadn't taken the highway, Shayne fell behind the wheel of his own car and got it started, kicking it into gear and cutting through the grounds of the motel to come out on the same road Crosland had taken. Then he saw why the stuntman had not gone up the highway. Coming toward the motel was a sheriff's car, still visible in the twilight. Graner had shown up at last.

Shayne wasn't even aware of the grin that pulled at his face.

His foot came down hard on the accelerator, sending the Buick spurting into the dust cloud raised by the fleeing Crosland. Shayne didn't know where this road led except to the mansion, but Crosland probably did. He might well have already charted an escape route out through the Glades.

The nicked shoulder was hurting, but not enough to affect his driving. He held onto the wheel with his left hand while he got out his pistol, then switched hands. Keeping the car as steady as possible,

Shayne stuck the gun out the window and started squeezing off shots at Crosland.

He couldn't see if he was hitting anything, but he heard the sudden squealing of tires and brakes. There was a grinding crash, and then Shayne came out of the dust cloud. In the fading twilight, he could see Crosland's car butted up against one of the thick-boled trees that lined the road. Crosland was out of the car, the gun still in his hand, running toward the looming old mansion, which was now only a hundred yards or so away.

Shayne hit his brakes and brought the Buick to a rocking stop as Crosland disappeared into the huge old house. He was out of it in an instant, charging toward the mansion. A gun barked inside the house, sending a slug screaming through the open front door, but it went well wide of Shayne.

Then he was vaulting up the steps onto the verandah and plunging into the house, gun up and ready to snap a shot in any direction. He heard the clatter of footsteps above him.

Crosland was running up the broad, winding staircase where the cast and crew had been filming earlier in the day. He paused long enough to squeeze off another shot at Shayne, who ducked back into an alcove off the entrance hall. A second later, Shayne was out of his cover and running toward the first floor landing.

He had no idea where Crosland thought he was going. There was no way out up there. But Crosland couldn't be thinking straight. Everything, all of his careful plans, had suddenly gone awry, and Shayne was on to him. The stuntman could only be thinking of blind flight now.

Crosland was one flight ahead of him, but Shayne still might have winged him. He held his fire instead. Crosland would realize soon enough that he was trapped.

The moment came when he reached the top floor and looked around wildly. There were no more stairs, no places in which to hide where he couldn't be found easily. Shayne paused on the landing below him. The great center hall of the mansion, open from top to bottom of the house, loomed to his right. He could hear Crosland's harsh breathing as the man leaned on the railing of the balcony that ran around the open area.

And then Crosland's eyes fell on the huge chandeliers that hung from the ceiling on long chains.

Shayne said wearily, "That's it, Crosland. Toss the gun down and then come down yourself. Graner and all the others will be here in a few minutes, and there's no way you can talk your way out of it now."

He was trying to ignore the stinging pain where the bullet had bit out a small chunk of his shoulder.

Crosland kept the gun trained downwards at Shayne. It was a stand-off, or at least it appeared that way to the detective. He suddenly saw the wild glint in Crosland's eyes, though, and felt a tingle of apprehension go through him.

"I don't intend to talk my way out, Shayne," Crosland said. "I'm going to fight my way out, just like they did in the old-fashioned movies. God, what gags they did then!"

Shayne saw Crosland's eyes go to the chandeliers. The chains supporting them were a good twelve feet away from the balcony. Shayne barked, "Forget it, Crosland! You'd never make —"

But Crosland was stepping up onto the railing, balancing easily, putting the gun between his teeth like it was a sword and he was Douglas Fairbanks. The chandeliers stretched out before him, an avenue of escape for anyone who was daring and resourceful enough to try them.

Shayne could have shot him then.

Crosland's lips smiled around the gun, and then he was launching out into mid-air, a lithe, graceful figure who had been doing that sort of thing for years and making it look easy.

Shayne had to give him credit. He came within a foot of the closest chain.

The sudden, disbelieving scream, the clatter of the gun on the tiles of the first floor, the soggy thud that made Shayne's insides cringe for a split-second . . . The sounds all seemed to come together. But they weren't as bad as the low, agonized moan that came right on their heels.

Shayne turned on the stairs and put his gun away as Graner burst into the mansion, followed closely by Falcone, McCluskey, and Frye. He walked down the stairs, and for only two flights, it was a damn long walk.

"— BROKE BOTH HIS LEGS, THE DAMN FOOL," Graner was saying later. "He's determined not to take the fall alone, though. He's spilling all he knows about the people who hired him to ruin that movie."

"Thank God it's over," McCluskey said. "Now we can get back to work and maybe still salvage everything."

"Not around here, you won't," Graner said with a smirk. "I hear your permit to film here is going to be revoked, on account of all the trouble."

McCluskey let out a howl and started to argue. Shayne got up from the table and left the bar. After everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, he wanted a little bit of peace and quiet for a change.

"You couldn't take the post-mortem either, I guess," Falcone said from the shadows.

Shayne lit a cigarette, the sudden glare highlighting both of their tired faces. He blew out a puff of smoke and said, "I could have liked and respected Crosland quite a bit under other circumstances. It's bad enough when a good man goes sour. I don't want to listen to McCluskey and Graner wrangling about whether or not you can finish your shooting here."

Falcone shrugged. "If we can't, we'll go somewhere else and finish up. After all that's happened, Mark Fontana would spend his last nickel on this picture now. No one's going to try to sabotage his little girl's movie and get away with it."

"You don't sound too sold on any of it."

"It's not that good a movie. I had to write the damn thing to a formula to satisfy Fontana and Barney and the people out there who buy the tickets to see this stuff at the drive-in on hot summer nights. So I just do the best I can with it. As a piece of time, though, it's not much."

Shayne glanced up at the stars, bright against the black sky, and said, "A piece of time?"

"A famous actor said it once. Said when you were making movies, you were really giving people little, tiny pieces of time that they never forget. But this is just a bad piece of hokum, all around."

Shayne grinned and laughed softly. "I think you're taking the whole thing too seriously. What about the old saying that the show must go on?"

Falcone shot him a glance. "Too seriously, eh? Well, then, Shayne, how would you feel about playing a private detective in my next movie? I can get together with Tim Rourke and base the screenplay on one of your actual cases . . ."

Shayne flipped the butt of his cigarette away into the night. "What's the quickest way to Miami?" he asked. ●

Next Month

Mike Shayne returns in a new
adventure written by Brett Halliday.

Don't miss it!

Who would kill Santa Claus in a store window in front of dozens of witnesses? And how? The beautiful and efficient Detective-Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers would have her lovely hands full on this case!

The Santa Claus Killer

by MEL D. AMES

"LIEUTENANT, SOMEONE JUST KILLED SANTA CLAUS!"

Detective-Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers lifted her honey-blonde head and levelled quizzical blue eyes at the man who had come bursting into her office.

"What *are* you talking about?"

Detective-Sergeant Mark Swanson regarded his immediate superior with chagrin. He wondered if there was *anything* that could ripple that queenly calm.

"It's true," he persisted. "Santa Claus is dead."

The Lieutenant smiled indulgently and proceeded to scatter piles of official-looking papers with her elbows, to make room in the center of her desk for a vial of blood-red nail polish. Mark watched in rapt frustration as she drew a red swath over the tip of an elegantly arched finger.

"That's like saying God is dead. Really, Mark — who would want to kill Santa Claus?"

Mark thought about it.

"Mrs. Claus?"

Cathy Carruthers favored her assistant with another disarming smile and continued calmly adorning her nails.

"Sit down, Mark. Tell me about it."

MARK PURSED HIS LIPS, SIGHED OBEISANTLY, AND LOWERED his rugged frame into a chair. Working with the "Amazon," as she was known to her burly colleagues in Homicide, demanded certain compromises that might have daunted a lesser man than Mark. It had taken him several months on the job to see beyond the stunning, six-foot, honey-haired female he had been assigned to as partner, but when he did, he discovered a remarkable individual, a true friend and a detective of rare acumen. Watching her now, as she hung her freshly painted nails up to dry, wrists limp, her classic features inscrutably unperturbed, he felt a mild alarm at his growing attachment to this larger-than-life Amazonian epic.

"You were saying?"

Mark yanked his mind back to the moment.

"Dispatch," he began, "just took a call from a Lloyd Drexler, security man at Martindew's Department Store. He said there's been a killing in that big display window on Central Avenue, the one they doll up every year to look like Santa's Workshop. You know, a bunch of dwarfs making toys and things for Christmas, and some guy in a red suit and white whiskers dressed up like Santa Claus. Well, that's one sad Santa that won't be going down any chimneys this Christmas — some one just choked the life out of him."

"Did they apprehend the killer?"

"That's the strange thing about it, Lieutenant. It apparently happened while he was sitting in the window going Ho-Ho-Ho to a crowd of starry-eyed Christmas shoppers."

"And?"

"No one saw it happen."

"Hmm."

Mark recognized that contemplative "Hmm." The Amazon, he knew, loved nothing better than a puzzling mystery. Mark remembered having once used the word "unsolvable" in connection with a particularly abstruse murder case. She had been quick to admonish him. "No such thing. If murder can be done, it can be solved." And solve it she did.

Mark scrambled up on his size twelves as the Lieutenant suddenly shouldered a red leather purse and headed for the door. The purse matched her newly painted fingertips, he noticed (as a good officer should), and her lipstick.

"Where to?" he asked.

"To find out who killed Santa Claus on the very Eve of Christmas," she tossed back over her shoulder, "and why."

CHRISTMAS AT MARTINDEW'S WAS ADVERTISED as a family affair. They had used the "family" motif from the beginning, back to thirty years ago when it was known as Martindew's General Store, and run mostly by family members. The business had flourished over the years, evolving rapidly into one of the largest department stores in the entire state. The seasonal window display, "Santa's Workshop," had grown with it, from a small nativity scene in an old storefront window to an annual happening of almost legendary acclaim. Today, it was a major Christmas event in Metro, welcomed, and viewed with delight, by Santa fans of all ages.

Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers stood now in the center of Santa's Workshop and looked about her with coldly perceptive eyes. The window area, she observed, was about twenty feet wide, by maybe thirty, with a floor-to-ceiling plate glass window on one side that covered its entire length. The drapes were drawn now, but the whole exhibit was still operating at full tilt. It was a busy scene.

Toys were everywhere, toys of every kind. A dozen look-alike elves, with big grinning heads and white gloved hands, still were hammering, sawing, chiselling away, all in rhythm to a tinkling yuletide arrangement of *Whistle While You Work*. A huge pine Christmas tree stood in one corner, slowly turning, dazzling, with the glitter of a thousand ornaments and a magic mile of tinsel. And in the center of it all sat Santa, swaying gently in his automated rocker, with his glassy eyes staring vacantly ahead, and an uncharacteristic blush of purple in the once rosy hue of his cheeks.

"Has anything been touched?" The Lieutenant directed her question to a uniformed police officer who, together with his partner, had been guarding the murder scene against well-meaning-bunglers and the just-plain-curious.

"No, sir — uh, Mam — uh — "

The Amazon turned her back on the officer's confusion with an amused grin. "Wait outside, please."

When they were alone, she said, "Mark, it seems incomprehensible, does it not, that some one, or some thing, could have strangled the life out of our unhappy Santa — or whomever — and not been seen be someone, some one, in the crowd at the window,"

"Yeah, it's got me stumped."

"The most obvious suspects, of course, would be the elves — "

"Lieutenant," Mark's tone was disparaging, "how could a mechanical elf — ?"

"Or someone dressed up like one."

"Uh-huh," said Mark with skepticism, "and what about the thirty

odd men, women and kids who were standing on the other side of the window, watching?"

"Yes," the Lieutenant said quietly, as she moved to a spot behind the body.

She lifted the white hair at the nape of Santa's neck and exposed the sinister home-made garrote. It looked evil, Mark thought, even just lying idly there against the skin. It was fashioned of white nylon cord, with the replica of a small metal clothes-line tightener (also white) at one end, and a loop the size of a man's fist at the other. The cord, which was about four feet in length, dangled down behind the rocker and matched its tireless rhythm in a slow swinging arc.

"Recognize this, Mark?" The Lieutenant rotated the small white "tightener" between an immaculately-lacquered thumb and forefinger. It was the cylindrical type, slightly narrowed at one end and with three tiny metal balls trapped inside. When a line was passed through it in one direction, from the narrow to the wide end, it moved freely; if the direction of travel was reversed, the cord was halted by the jamming of the metal balls in the narrow end of the cylinder.

"An effective clincher," Mark observed, "and available at almost any hardware store — but why so long a cord?" When he extended the length of nylon straight back from the rocker, it reached well into a small cluster of elves.

"Maybe that's your answer," said the Lieutenant, and she drew his attention to the fact that only nine of the mechanical elves were animated. The three positioned directly behind Santa's chair wore happy grinning faces, but were otherwise non-productive in the Christmas effort of imaginary toy making.

"Lieutenant?" One of the uniformed officers had thrust his head through the partly open door. "There's a Lloyd Drexler here, wants to come in. Says he's in charge of store security."

"Let him in, officer."

A LARGE MAN, SIX FOOT PLUS and built like a line backer, crammed his way through the door.

"Mark." The Lieutenant spoke in quiet even tones to her colleague, but her eyes were on Drexler. "I'd like you to get the Medical Examiner down here, soon as possible. The Lab people, too, and the pho-togs. We're going to need all the help we can get on this one. And Mark, have those two officers round up as many witnesses as they can find, anyone who was in front of that window during the past hour and a half." Then, as Mark turned to leave, "Mr. Drexler, I'm glad you're here. There are a few questions — "

"Yeah," the big man interrupted, "and I've got a few of my own. This here is my territory, and don't you forget it. And I don't want no guy in a monkey suit telling me where I can go and where I can't." He let his eyes travel up, then down, the Lieutenant's imposing frame. "Now, I guess I got some dame giving me the I'm-in-charge routine."

The Amazon drew herself up to her full height. Her eyes had the glint of cold blue steel.

"Mr. Drexler. I am Detective-Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers, Metro Central, Eleventh Precinct. You can talk to me now, or not, as you wish. But kindly be advised that I am not intimidated by your supercilious, machoistic posturing. As a matter of fact, I'd be less than honest if I did not reveal to you that I find your behavior tiresome and churlish in the extreme, something more befitting a witless adolescent than a Martindew's store detective. Now we can just as easily continue this conversation downtown, at headquarters, at my convenience, or we can resume where we left off a few moments ago. What is your choice?"

It was not possible for a man of Drexler's build to wilt, but he did slump a little.

"I — well — " he stammered, not knowing precisely how, or to what extent, he had been so imprudently squelched.

"Anyhow," he muttered, "there's not a whole lot I can tell you."

"Tell me this: are you acquainted with the victim?"

"Yeah. That's the *man*, himself. Nathan P. Martindew, president and owner of Martindew's Department Store."

The Lieutenant registered her surprise. "What on earth would a man of that caliber be doing in a Santa Claus suit?"

"Nothing new. He takes an hour shift every day. Family tradition, or something. Says he's been doing it for thirty years."

"He took the same shift every day?"

"Yeah. Never failed. Nine to nine-fifty. Then the display closes down for ten minutes. Coffee break, a change of Santas. Goes on that way all day; every hour on the hour."

"Who takes over at ten, when Mr. Martindew leaves?"

"A couple of old guys take turns. They work out of the Display Department. Christmas extras. Nathan P. always hires them himself — you know, doing the interviews, training them to Ho-Ho, like that —"

"One thing, Mr. Drexler, strikes me as rather strange."

"What's that?"

"With Nathan P. Martindew, himself, sitting here, dead, why isn't there more of a commotion in this place?"

"No one knows about it, that's why. If it wasn't for those two cops —"

The Lieutenant cut him short. "I seem to recall. Mr. Drexler, that Nathan P. Martindew was somewhat incapacitated — confined to a wheel-chair, if I remember correctly."

"That's right. It was polio, or something. Anyway, he was pretty well paralyzed from the neck down. A lot of good all his money was to him. We had to wheel him in, then lift him from the wheel-chair to the rocker. The same again, in reverse, when his hour was up."

"I see. And weren't you the one who phoned the police?"

"Yes."

"And you also discovered the body?"

"Well, yes, I did. But Penny Lamb was right there with me. We closed the drapes, opened the door, and there he was, just like he is now, deader than a Christmas turkey."

"Where will I find this Penny Lamb?"

"Miss Penelope Lamb, if you don't mind."

THE LIEUTENANT TURNED TO SEE a large heavy woman, equally as tall as herself but obviously not poured from the same classic mold, sharing the doorway with a frustrated police officer.

"Officer, let her in."

"As if he could stop me," said Penelope Lamb. She came bursting through the door like a Marine hitting the beach at Okinawa. She wore faded blue jeans and a matching denim shirt, both of which seemed to be stretched to the limit of their capacities.

"Please stay over here near the window, Miss Lamb," the Lieutenant cautioned. "Our people from HQ will not want anything disturbed."

"For all the good it'll do them."

"Now what makes you say that?"

"You tell *me*, Lieutenant." Penelope Lamb pointed a plump finger at the defunct Santa Claus. "Old Nathan P. was in here all alone for fifty minutes, until Drexler and I came in together and found him dead. Even if someone else did come in here during that time, which they did not, it still remains that no less than thirty pairs of eyes were on Nathan P. every second of that time. I just don't see how it could have happened."

"Perhaps not, Miss Lamb, but happen it did. And I intend to find out precisely how, and by whom. Now suppose you start by telling me where you were this morning, when Nathan P. Martindew first assumed his seat in the window."

"I was right there with him, Lieutenant. It was Drexler and me who lifted him onto the rocker."

"And then?"

"Then we turned on the display machinery, opened the drapes, and left."

"That how you see it, Mr. Drexler?"

"Yeah. I was the one who opened the drapes. Penny switched on the rocker. She was still fussing with his beard, straightening his hat, you know, last minute touches —"

"But he was still visibly alive when you both had finally withdrawn from the display area?"

"Oh, yeah," said Drexler emphatically. "Nathan P. was an old dragon at the best of times, and a real stickler about starting on time. He made no bones about telling us get outta there and get the show started. He was still nattering away at us when we closed the door on him."

"Miss Lamb." The Lieutenant pursed her lips against an extended finger. "What is your particular function, here at the store?"

"You're standing in the middle of it, Lieutenant." She swung her pudgy arm to take in the entire exhibit. "I'm assistant manager in Display. This whole show is our brain child — mine and Reggie Martin's."

"And who might Reggie Martin be?"

"He might be me, damn it. And tell this clown to keep his hands to himself."

A LITTLE MAN, WITH A HEAD THAT LOOKED too large for his body, suddenly appeared at the door. He was about four-foot zilch in his hush puppies, and no bigger than one of the elves that were still banging away at the toys in the window. He was dressed in jeans, like Penny Lamb, and a denim shirt that was open almost to his navel. A bronze medallion swung from a leather thong around his neck and shone like a small sun from the black jungle of hair on his little chest. A pair of white cotton gloves dangled from his back pocket. He was prevented from entering further into the room by the restraining arm of the law, one hand of which had seized him firmly by the scruff of his neck.

"Another one for you, Lieutenant." The officer struggled valiantly to hold onto the little man who was apparently much stronger than his size would suggest.

"It's all right, officer. Let him go. But, please, no more."

Reggie Martin waddled in and took up a position near Penelope Lamb. He was about eye-level with her belt buckle. He had a ruddy, just-scrubbed look, like a reluctant little boy on his way to church on Sunday morning.

"And who might you be?" he said, looking skyward at the Amazon who towered above him like a giant gray sequoia.

"I'm Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers, Mr. Martin. And I am currently investigating the death of the unfortunate gentleman in the Santa Claus costume. Is there anything you would like to tell me about it?"

"What is there to tell? He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's that all right." The Lieutenant smiled thinly. "And where were you this morning, when Mr. Martindew took his place in the window?"

"I was in Display, right behind Miss Lamb and Drexler when they opened the drapes at nine."

"And when he was found dead?"

"I was still in Display, just where I was supposed to be."

"Do you two concur?" The Lieutenant looked at Drexler, then at Penelope Lamb. They nodded their heads in acquiescence.

"I remember him there at nine," Drexler added reflectively, "But I can't say for sure he was there when we found the body."

"He was there," Penelope Lamb said unequivocally.

The Lieutenant turned her attention back to little man.

"What is your capacity, Mr. Martin, in the Display Department?"

"I'm the manager."

"I see. And the Santa Workshop exhibit is the creation solely of you and Miss Lamb?"

"Yes."

"Has anyone else from Display been permitted to work on it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because Penel — Miss Lamb and I have been doing it for years. No one else has ever worked on it. It's our baby, that's all."

"Yes, well —"

"This exhibit is not as superficial as it may at first appear, Lieutenant." The little man sounded somewhat put out by the Lieutenant's seeming indifference. "Take Santa's chair, for instance," he pointed with pride to the object in question. "It will not only rock on its pedestal, back and forth, but it will also move in a fifteen degree arc either side of center. If the mechanism is activated promptly on the hour, the rocker will complete one full arc to the right, and return, in exactly ten minutes. It will then automatically repeat the left. After

a fifty minute shift (or ten completed arcs) the chair will end up precisely where it began, facing the crowd at the window. It requires a great deal of skill, Lieutenant, to achieve that kind of precision."

"I'm sure it does."

THE LIEUTENANT DROPPED TO ONE KNEE and ran her fingers appraisingly over the ornate pedestal on which the chair was perched. The switch that activated the rocker was at the back of the base and the mechanism itself was skillfully hidden behind a gayly colored facade, an elaborate rendering of fairyland fantasia around a horde of little elfin gargoyles that winked and grinned with the spirit of Christmas. The tiny grotesque heads were carved from solid wood and bolted securely to the base on all sides of the pedestal.

"I'm duly impressed," said the Lieutenant with apparent sincerity.

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

Their eyes met briefly on the same level before the Amazon resumed the perpendicular. "The elves, Mr. Martin," she said reflectively, "the twelve mechanical elves. They seem to bear a remarkable resemblance —"

"To me?" The little display manager moved obligingly to the group of tree elves behind Santa's chair. He donned the white gloves from his back pocket, assumed an elfin pose, and grinned. With a little make-up, he would have been indistinguishable from any one of them. "I'm the original, Lieutenant. All the elves were patterned after me."

"Remarkable," said the Lieutenant, but her voice suddenly took on a warm confiding quality. "Mr. Martin. I sense that you are inordinately disturbed about something, that you are not totally at ease with me. Are you able to tell me why?"

Reggie Martin tugged nervously at the bronze medallion and shifted his weight from one little foot to the other. He glanced hesitantly up at Penelope Lamb.

"Look, Lieutenant, maybe there *is* something. But I think we should be talking about it up on the seventh floor, in Nathan's office."

"I don't understand."

"Reggie —" Penelope Lamb put a lot of concern into that one word.

"It's got to come sooner or later, Pen. No point in hiding it any longer now." He turned to the Lieutenant. "It's not generally known around the store, but I'm not really Reggie Martin. What I mean is, Reggie Martin is a simple diminutive of my real name: Reginald Martindew. That dead Santa Claus, Lieutenant, is my brother."

LLOYD DREXLER'S JAW DROPPED in silent disbelief. Penelope

Lamb's rotund face was expressionless.

"Very well, Mr., uh, Martindew." If the Amazon was surprised, she did not show it. "I see no reason why we should not accede to your request. I still have a few loose ends to see to down here, but we will all four of us reassemble on the seventh floor in say, fifteen minutes. But before —"

The Lieutenant stopped abruptly in mid-sentence and looked up. The star at the top of the Christmas tree had suddenly burst into a series of brilliant, eye-blinding flashes. The Lieutenant blinked as all eyes darted to the tree.

"What is *that* about?"

"Star of Bethlehem," Penelope Lamb said proudly. "It's new this year. People love it."

"I'm sure. How often does it happen?"

"Every hour, on the half hour, for a ten second duration," Miss Lamb explained, "I've seen people wait the better part of an hour just to see it come on."

"Well, we were fortunate indeed," the Amazon ventured with a smile. "We got zapped without having to wait at all."

LIEUTENANT CATHY CARRUTHERS and Sergeant Mark Swanson struggled through the main floor crush of Christmas shoppers toward the elevator lobby at the rear of the store. The frail, familiar strains of *Holy Night* permeated the air, making something almost sacred out of the crass Christmas con game that had everybody clamoring over each other to give up their money. The elevators were taking off as fast as a bevy of young girls in abbreviated Santa costumes could cram them full. The Lieutenant and Mark stood in line behind the others, waiting their turn.

"Well, Lieutenant." Mark unbuttoned his coat and jammed his hands into his pants pockets. "What do you make of it?"

"Not much." The Lieutenant panned an exasperated eye over the milling heads of the shopper.

"I mean this Santa Claus business."

"Oh." She nudged her nose thoughtfully with a genteelly flexed knuckle. "I find it somewhat intriguing, to say the least."

"Well, I don't mind admitting I'm stumped. There just isn't any way it could have happened. Someone must be lying."

"Mark, how can you say that? We've just finished checking it out." The Lieutenant's tone was more speculative than assertive. "The two relief Santas have corroborated the statements of Penelope Lamb and

Lloyd Drexler, as well as that of the little guy, Reggie — whatever. I can't believe that *everyone* is lying. By the way," she added, "did you get that self-styled garrote to the Lab?"

"Yes I did."

"Good." She turned eyes on Mark that seemed to be looking right through him. "I find it difficult to justify that loop, or hand-grip, at the end of the cord. And why was the cord of just sufficient length to reach into that grouping of elves behind the rocker?"

"It doesn't look too good for the elves, does it?" Mark grinned.

"Nothing about this case looks particularly good for the elves," the Lieutenant replied soberly, as though there had been nothing facetious in his comment.

"Yeah, I see what you mean," Mark reflected. "According to three independent witnesses, Nathan P. was alive and well at nine o'clock, and in full view of a crowd of Christmas shoppers until ten minutes of ten, when Drexler and Penny Lamb drew the drapes and found him dead. The only company he had during that fifty minutes, were the twelve grinning, four-foot elves. But even so, Lieutenant, what could they have done (assuming a mechanical elf could do anything) with all those people watching?"

"Yes," the Lieutenant mused softly, "what?"

"THIS WAY, PLEASE."

One of the girls beckoned from the door of an elevator, and they allowed themselves to be swept inside with a dozen other sardines. But Mark found no discomfort in being crammed into such close quarters with his enchanting partner. After the initial squirming, he found himself face to face with her, gazing breathlessly into those unbelievable blue eyes, just inches from his own.

"Hi," he said, with a crooked little grin.

"Hi, yourself,"

She gave him a smile that promised to keep his fantasies flaming for a week.

The elevator clanked to a stop at the seventh floor with tummy-turning abruptness. An attractive black girl met them at the reception desk.

"Lieutenant Carruthers?" She addressed herself to Mark.

"I'm Lieutenant Carruthers." The Amazon gave the girl a tolerant smile. She had long since resigned herself to this hesitancy on the part of some, to readily accept her, a woman, in what was generally regarded to be a male role. The girl conducted a brief woman-to-woman appraisal of the Amazon and said, "Follow me, please."

They trailed the black girl's engaging back through an immense, open room filled with desks, filing cabinets, rapidly clicking typewriters, and people. Everyone and everything seemed to be in a hectic state of regulated confusion. They zigzagged through it all to a row of offices on the far side, where they were ushered through a door that read: Nathan P. Martindew, President..

THE OFFICE WAS IMPRESSIVELY SPACIOUS. A thick pile rug lay underfoot, and luxurious furnishings in soft leather and deep red walnut enriched the decor. A huge desk dominated the room, behind which, the new-born Reginald Martindew sat looking like a midget mushroom on a two-dollar pizza.

"Come in, Lieutenant." The little man was effusive. "You know everyone, of course. Miss Lamb, Drexler, Miss Gayle (who has just escorted you from the elevator) and old faithful, himself, Elmer Sawatsky, Elmer has been with the firm for almost thirty years. He is our chief accountant."

"How do you do, Lieutenant."

A bespectacled, nondescript sort of man in his middle fifties offered a limp hand to the Lieutenant. She took it briefly, nodded to the others, and folded her elegant form into one of the leather chairs. Mark took the chair beside her.

"Mr. Martindew." The Lieutenant spoke directly at the man's head, which was all she could see of him above the polished surface of the desk. "Don't you feel that you might be jumping into your new role as president somewhat precipitously, if not without a certain presumptuousness? After all, your own brother has just been killed — murdered, his body not yet cold."

"Presumptuous, Lieutenant? Precipitous?" The new president had to raise his elbows to shoulder height to place his forearms on the desk. His little fingers toyed excitedly with the bronze medallion. "Hardly. I've waited years for this moment. The news of my brother's death this morning could not have come at a better time: Christmas Eve! How does that carol go now — *Oh ti-idings of co-omfort and joy*. You see, I make no illusions as to how I feel. Lieutenant, this promises to be the most momentous Christmas of my entire life."

"Reggie, not now." Penelope Lamb filled a leather chair to overflow, a little to one side of the desk. "This is not the time," she pleaded.

"She's right, of course." Reginald Martindew tried several times to raise his head above the level of his hands. "My relationship with my brother, with my family, is undeniably a personal matter, and I would not normally discuss these things before the people who are presently

in this room. But because of the way my brother died, and the circumstances that have preceded my rightful ascension to this chair today, the story, quite frankly, will be unrepresible. Every sordid detail will soon be splashed over newspapers, tabloids, and two-bit scandal sheets from here to Vladivostock. What would be the point in withholding anything at this juncture?"

"Then you won't mind," the Lieutenant said as she settled back in the chair, "imparting some of those details you refer to, for our edification."

REGINALD MARTINDEW LOOKED AROUND THE ROOM, from one expressionless face to another, then shrugged his tiny shoulders.

"I was the oldest, the rightful heir. I had every appearance of a normal, healthy child, the first born, the pride of the Martindews, until it was noticed that I wasn't growing as rapidly as I should. By the time I was six, it was obvious that something was wrong. That was in the days before they knew too much about pituitary malfunctions which, of course, was my problem. Today, a series of natural-hormone injections would have remedied the situation, quite simply, and I would probably have grown eye-to-eye with your remarkable self, Lieutenant."

All eyes turned momentarily to the Lieutenant as though to see for themselves what Reggie might have grown eye-to-eye with, under more favorable circumstances.

"Nathan was born then, and I was shuttled off to one side, out of sight and mind. I never even knew my two younger sisters, whose twin births followed Nathan's by some eighteen months. As I grew older, the family law firm legally changed my name, and I was sent away with a modest, but liveable, allowance. But, at maturity, I returned, mortified at this rejection by the family, and by threatening to reveal my true identity, I was able to get a sizeable increase in my allowance and a job for life, here at Martindews. What I did *not* know, at the time, was that only a few weeks prior to my re-appearance, the Martindew family had been touched by the hand of divine retribution (in my view, at least): Nathan, the favorite son, had been struck down by polio. The disease (acute anterior poliomyelitis, to be precise) left him totally devastated, and paralyzed from head to toe. Elmer, here, will attest to all that I have said, thus far."

Elmer nodded his nondescript head in agreement.

"Seven months ago," Reginald continued, "both my parents were killed in an automobile accident. The entire corporate estate, of course, went to Nathan, except for minor, non-voting stock allotments to my two sisters, who have since married and left Metro for sunnier climes. I tried to contest it — secretly — but I could not find a responsible law

firm willing risk the resultant pressures that would inevitably follow a suit taken against the highly influential Martindew administration. That is, until recently. Nathan, of course, was fully cognizant of what I was up to before he died, and did not actively oppose the action. Its ultimate success is *ultra vires* (as they say). Simply a matter of time."

"How will Nathan's death affect your claim?"

"Not at all, really. Except that now I will inherit all — not half — of the Martindew corporate holdings."

"That could be a sizeable motive," said the Lieutenant softly, "for permanently removing your brother from the scene."

"Oh, come now, Lieutenant. I was already a potential millionaire before Nathan was killed. Why would I risk all that, for money I could never hope to spend?"

"It's my job to examine every motive," the Lieutenant replied. "Motives, like life itself, are sometimes obscure and irrational."

"What about the rest of these people?" Penelope Lamb rushed to Reggie's defense. "Take Drexler, there. His job was on the line. Nathan P. was going to fire him right after Christmas. Tried to get himself into bed with a young, pretty shoplifter, by promising to drop the charges. She went to the boss with it —"

Lloyd Drexler's face had turned the color of cranberry sauce.

"I don't have to sit here and listen to this," he fumed. "I'm not the only one with egg on my face. It ain't no secret that Miss Gayle here has been fraternizing with the office manager, and vice versa, apparently. How do we know old Nathan P. wasn't getting ready to dump him and her both? And Penny Lamb's relationship with Reggie wasn't all nip and tuck in the Display Department — he's been sharing her apartment for the better part of two years, that I know of. What they could've been cooking up together is anybody's guess. A regular old *Peyton Place*, ain't it, Lieutenant?"

"Oh, my," said Elmer Sawatsky.

"And you, too, you old fraud." Drexler was not yet finished. "How do we know you aren't cooking the books and embezzling yourself up to those ice-cube eyeglasses you wear? Like they say, Lieutenant, Nobody's perfect."

MARK LOOKED FROM FACE TO FACE for the reaction to Drexler's outburst. Miss Gayle had turned a slightly lighter shade of black while remaining painfully aloof. Penny Lamb's flaccid face was an overt mask of indignation and anger, and Elmer Sawatsky squirmed in his chair as though involved in private little struggle with himself for the courage to raise his hand to ask to leave the room. Only the little

president seemed immune to the store detective's vindictive tirade. The face that peeked up from behind the enormous desk was wreathed in a tolerant, benificent smile, a product, it would seem, of his new-found authority.

"Please. Gentlemen. Ladies." Reginald Martindew had now assumed a self-appointed role as mediator. "Let's not be carried away. The untimely death of my brother will touch on all of us, of course, one way or another. That is inevitable. But no one has yet been accused of anything. Have they? And I very much doubt that anyone will be. I would suggest that Lieutenant Carruthers is going to be hard put to tell us just *how* Nathan was murdered, much less by whom. Right, Lieutenant?"

"Wrong." The Lieutenant slowly uncoiled from the depths of the leather chair. She stood tall and silent for a moment, then paced out a small circle in the center of the room, as though modeling the latest thing from Frederick's, her exquisite body moving with the naked stealth and power of a jungle beast beneath the gray material of her suit. Mark knew a time of revelation was close at hand, and he wondered if he would ever become accustomed to the breath-robbing beauty and intelligence of this astounding woman.

The Lieutenant stopped in front of Elmer Sawatsky. He seemed to pale a little behind his ocular ice-cubes. "Mr. Sawatsky," she said, not unkindly, "I cannot believe that you possess either the motive or the means — not to mention the fortitude — to cause the death of your late employer. If, in fact, you were 'cooking the books,' as Mr. Drexler has so groundlessly implied, it will soon come to light in the audit that will inevitably follow the death of Mr. Martindew. You may leave, Mr. Sawatsky, and I suggest you take Miss Gayle along with you."

The Lieutenant turned to the young black with a condescending lift of her flawless brows.

"The allegations that your services to your immediate superior may not have ended with dictation, typing and filing, is of no concern to me in this investigation. You are an attractive young lady, Miss Gayle. It is my fervent hope that you will show better judgement in the future when endeavoring to advance your career."

Miss Gayle hurried after the accountant and closed the door softly behind her. The Lieutenant then turned to Mark.

"See that these other people are taken downtown, Mark, given their rights, and held."

Reginald Martindew's smile faded. Then the face behind the smile suddenly disappeared. A moment later, the little man came running out around the side of the desk, the bronze medallion flying in breeze.

He stopped about three feet from the Lieutenant, his hands on his hips, looking up at her.

"Are you serious?" he choked. "You can't hold us. You don't have a damn thing to go on."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that."

"Are you accusing *me* of murder?"

"That," said the Lieutenant, "could be a distinct possibility."

"You're making a big mistake, lady." He endeavored to convey with his tone of voice what a threatening posture had laughingly failed to achieve. "I'm not without influence now, you know."

"Nor, sir, am I."

Reginald Martindew's exasperation was suddenly more than he could rationally endure. He drew back a little foot and levelled it with irreverent spite against an hitherto sacrosanct Amazonian shin. "Damn you," he sputtered.

The Amazon winced, but made no sound as she calmly reached down and collared the little man with one well-groomed hand and lifted him, kicking and squirming, to shoulder height. "Cuff him," she said quietly to Mark, "and take him in."

Mark was no stranger to the occasional display of the Amazon's awesome strength and agility, but each new manifestation left him a little crushed, with yet another bruise to his hairy-chested ego. He took the weight of the midget president from her outstretched arm with a grunt of mild surprise, then answered her embarrassed grin with one of his own. "The Dragon Lady strikes again," he said with a whimsical little groan.

THE RECORDS DEPARTMENT EMBOSOMED THE SMALLEST policeman on the Metro Force, hired on the strength of his status rather than his stature. Few of his colleagues were actually aware of his legal name, Garfield Leprohn. Someone, somewhere, sometime, had labelled him the *Leprechaun*, and the name had stuck. Cathy Caruthers was leaning over the counter, talking to the Leprechaun when Mark caught up with her.

"It wouldn't take much to make this place into another Santa's Workshop," Mark observed wryly, "a saw here, a chisel there, someone wearing white gloves and whistling —"

"If you don't mind," the Leprechaun scowled, "we're discussing official business."

The Lieutenant contained her amusement behind a mask of pretended interest in the file on the counter.

"This simply confirms Martindew's sad little story," the Lieutenant

said in a tight voice. "There was certainly no love lost between him and his brother."

"There is one point of interest," said the Leprechaun, eager to share the results of his seldom appreciated labors, "Penelope Lamb had apparently been with the Martindew family for almost as long as Reginald. She was the daughter of a servant, a housekeeper. They knew each other as children."

"Interesting," said the Lieutenant. "Anything on Drexler?"

"Not much, except that he's been cited half a dozen times for the same kind of thing that was getting him into hot water at Martindew's."

"That figures," the Lieutenant said matter-of-factly.

"The two relief Santas are just what they seemed to be, innocent bystanders. And I haven't been able to come up with much, yet, on either Sawatsky or Gayle."

"Let me know when you do."

As they left, the Lieutenant smiled her appreciation, and Mark went out whistling: *Whistle While You Work*....

SEATED IN HER OFFICE, LIEUTENANT CATHY CARRUTHERS went through the Records file again, in its entirety. As she closed the folder, Mark came in with another one just like it.

"The M.E.'s preliminary," he said. "The full report won't be available until after the autopsy."

"Is there anything in it?" the Lieutenant asked as she accepted the unusually thin file.

"Precious little, Lieutenant, and nothing we don't already know." Mark lowered his rugged frame into a chair. "Strangulation. Neck unbroken. No other marks. And a time of death that we've already come closer to ourselves."

The Lieutenant flipped disparagingly through the half dozen or so pages. She looked up at Mark. "Did you establish the sequence I gave you to have the suspects brought in?"

"Yes. Officers Fisk and Mayhew have been alerted." He consulted his watch. "They should be here any minute."

"And what about the report?"

"Whenever you're ready for it. I'll be right by the door."

"Good."

"But there won't be anything in it, Lieutenant. After all, what can you say about four feet of nylon cord and clothes-line tightener that had been rubbed smooth by the motion of the automated rocker?"

"Not much," the Lieutenant admitted with a grim sigh, "especially

if it should happen to be around your own neck." She planted her elbows on the desk and cradled her beautiful face in the palms of her hands. "We don't have much to go on, do we?"

"Even our own private little dwarf from Records wasn't able to give us anything," Mark grunted. "Say — maybe he's in on it. Yeah, I can see it now: the Leprechaun, moonlighting as one of the twelve mechanical elves, picking up a couple of extra bucks for Christmas. He killed Santa Claus because he didn't like what he was going to get for Christmas — a pocket periscope for watching parades, a reclining highchair, and the latest 8-track release of *Short People* . . ."

Cathy Carruthers tried unsuccessfully not to laugh at him. "Mark, don't you think you come down a little hard on the Leprechaun?"

"Temptation leaves me weak," Mark confided with mock innocence. "Just can't help myself."

"I've noticed."

"And yet —" Mark manner was suddenly, deadly serious. "That could be the answer."

"The Leprechaun did it?"

"One of the elves," Mark persisted, ignoring his senior partner's thinly-veiled sarcasm. "Maybe one of them was rigged."

THE LIEUTENANT SETTLED BACK IN HER CHAIR with a thoughtful sigh. She hooked a strand of spun gold from her forehead with a deftly curled third-finger and regarded her assistant with concern.

"I must confess, Mark, that your supposition is not without merit. However, I did have the elves checked out. There was nothing particularly sinister about any one of them."

"But the three that stood directly behind Santa's rocker were not mechanized," Mark asserted, "What if some four-foot phony had dress up like one of the elves, and taken its place in the window before Nathan P. had even been wheeled in?"

"Little Reggie?"

"Why not? Nobody would have known the difference. After all, he was the original elf, wasn't he? He was the model for all the others — he said so, himself." Mark thoughtfully rubbed the back of his neck. "The only problem, of course, is how he could have done anything, *anything*, with all those people watching."

"Well, that might not have been as difficult as you think, Mark. It would be my guess that if someone *had* stood behind the rocker, as you suggest, waiting for the right moment to tighten the noose on Santa's chubby neck, he would have done so at precisely nine-thirty."

"Why nine-thirty?"

"For two reasons. First, he would have to distract the attention of the Christmas shoppers who were all standing at the window, watching, and what better diversion could they have than the Star of Bethlehem? Every hour, on the half hour, remember? And I can personally attest to how successfully it would turn every eye to the tree, then leave them all blinded for several seconds after it had stopped flashing."

"Of course," Mark said excitedly, "that would have given him lots of time to — " His enthusiasm seemed to droop with sudden doubt. "What's the second reason?"

"The rocker," replied the Lieutenant. "We were briefed on its mechanical precision by little Reggie himself — remember — and on its side-to-side movement in particular. Each fifteen-degree arc (according to Reggie) took exactly five minutes to complete. Therefore, thirty minutes after the rocker started moving (at nine o'clock) and six five-minute-fifteen-degree arcs later, the time would be precisely nine-thirty, and Santa Claus would be facing directly toward the window."

"So?"

"Don't you see? If an overt act was to take place behind the rocker, there would be less chance of being seen if the back of the victim were 'facing' away from those who were watching at the window. The slightest movement, to either one side or the other, would only serve to diminish the cover. That factor, coupled with the precise timing of the Star of Bethlehem — "

"Right on, Lieutenant. That's the only way it *could* have happened."

"Not necessarily."

"But you just said — "

"I said the supposition was *possible*, and it is, but from the facts we have, I don't see how Reginald Martindew qualifies as a credible suspect."

"How many four-foot suspects do we have?"

"Unfortunately, only one. And he was in the Display Department, according to witnesses, *after* the exhibit had been put in motion, and the door closed. He had no way of getting in there without being seen."

Mark turned his palms up. "Which puts us right back where we started," he muttered.

"Not really. Sometimes, in order to determine what *is*, one must first peel away the obfuscating illusion of what is *not*." She gnawed pensively at an asymmetrical fingernail. "The anatomy of a mystery, after all, Mark, was best exemplified twenty centuries ago, by Salome, in her celebrated *Dance Of The Seven Veils*."

Mark sighed. " — and the punch line?"

"Only when all the veils have been removed," she smiled, sphinx-like, "does one perceive the naked truth."

Mark lifted his eyes to the ceiling in a gesture of hopelessness. "Let's face it, Lieutenant, the only 'naked truth' we've managed to unveil so far, is that *nobody* could have done it."

"Precisely," said the Amazon.

A SHARP RAP ON THE DOOR SIGNALLED THE ARRIVAL of Penelope Lamb. She stood in the doorway, bristling with indignation. Policewoman Fisk shoved her gently into the room, then left, closing the door softly behind her.

"Miss Lamb, please sit down."

"I don't like this, Lieutenant." Penelope Lamb was visibly nervous. She squeezed herself into a captain's chair and inflated her heavy chest with a deep, tremulous intake of air.

"Miss Lamb, your friend and colleague, Reginald Martindew, will be with us momentarily, together with Mr. Drexler. But before they arrive, there is a question I would like to put to you."

"Hmmp." Penelope Lamb squirmed uncomfortably on the hard wooden chair.

"I realize that one can feel a certain misguided loyalty, or protectiveness, perhaps, to those with whom they work from day to day. Understandable. But I feel I must caution you that what we are presently involved in is not a simple misdemeanor. We are dealing here with premeditated murder. And in this state the penalty for murder — one is *death*. I want you to think about that, Miss Lamb. I want you to think about it, to remember it, and to govern yourself accordingly."

Penelope Lamb appeared to pale a little, but she said nothing.

"Now then." The Lieutenant caught the nervously darting eyes and held them with her own. "I ask you straight out: did you conspire this morning, with any other person, in any way, to bring about the death of Nathan P. Martindew?"

"No. No, I did not."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Yes."

"You're not shielding anyone?"

"No."

"And you are presently under no threat?"

"No."

THE DOOR RATTLED IN ITS FRAME as Penelope Lamb mumbled

her last denial, and an amused Officer Mayhew ushered in a much *un-amused* Reginald Martindew. A moment later, Lloyd Drexler followed them into the room and quietly took a chair.

"Officer Mayhew, wait outside, please."

"I'm not saying a word," the little man sputtered as he shook loose from the policeman, "not one word, until my attorney gets here."

"That is your privilege, Mr. Martindew. I assume that you have already been permitted to call?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then. We will simply wait for his arrival. Please sit down."

Sit *up*, Mark thought, would have been a more accurate invitation, as he watched Martindew's new president climb up into the only vacant chair. The over-sized head seemed to wobble precariously atop the little body.

"Don't tell them anything," he said to Penelope Lamb, who sat biting disconcertedly at her lower lip. "They don't have a leg to stand on."

As though to disprove the little man's statement, Lieutenant Caruthers stood up on (not one, but) two perfectly good legs and strode thoughtfully to the window. Mark watched expectantly from his chair by the door as she turned slowly to face Penelope Lamb. Her voice, when she spoke, was quiet and deliberate.

"I sincerely hope, Miss Lamb, that you are fully cognizant of your situation. However Nathan Martindew might have died, the fact remains that *you* were the last person to have contact with him."

"Don't listen to her, Pen. She's just trying to trap you. You don't have to —"

Penelope Lamb turned on the little man with sudden vehemence. "Shut up, Reggie! Just *shut up!*" Her face was flushed and beaded with perspiration. "I'm not talking; I'm listening, okay?"

"Sure, Pen. I didn't mean to —"

Mark could not suppress a smile as the elfin body suddenly cowered — then jerked awkwardly forward again. The leather thong that suspended the medallion around the little neck had inadvertently caught on the wooden arm of the chair. But Mark's smile slowly faded in the graphic hush that followed as all eyes turned to watch the tiny fingers untangle the offending snare. It seemed a silent eternity before the Lieutenant finally spoke.

"Miss Lamb," she said calmly, her eyes still on Reggie's busy fingers, "I now must formally charge you with the murder of Nathan P. Martindew —"

Penelope Lamb's face was the color of new snow.

"— you may remain silent if you wish —" As the Lieutenant's monotone recitation continued, little Reggie squirmed in his chair like a recalcitrant child.

"Don't buy it, Pen. She's bluffing —"

"I told you to shut *up*, you little weasel." Penelope Lamb turned eyes on the Lieutenant that were bright with fear. "How could I have killed him? He was still alive when I left the exhibit. Drexler, here, can prove it."

Lloyd Drexler vacantly nodded his head.

The door opened then, as though on signal, just wide enough to allow a uniformed arm to shove a brown file folder in at Mark. He accepted it with a nod, and closed the door as the arm withdrew.

"Lab report," he said, handing the folder over to the Lieutenant. The self-styled garrote was coiled into a poly-bag and stapled to the front of the file.

"Recognize this?" The Lieutenant detached the bag from the file, extracted the garrote, and tossed it across to Penelope Lamb. She intercepted it with nervous fingers, deflecting it back at the Lieutenant as though it were white hot, or alive. "Damn you, Lieutenant. I never saw that thing before."

Lieutenant Carruthers caught the snaking cord on one red-tipped finger and held it up for all to see. She read slowly from the open file in her other hand: "*Dactylography: two discernible whorl-type impressions have been reimpresed from the smooth surface of the clothes-line tightener, one right thumbprint, one right index finger, Identification, as follows —*" She looked searchingly at Penelope Lamb from behind an unruly fall of golden hair. "Miss Lamb, need I say more —"

"Oh dear God!" Penelope Lamb slumped back in a dispirited heap. She looked at her little colleague with eyes that were glazed with fear and despair. "I told you it wouldn't work."

"No, Pen. No —"

Mark looked on in astonishment as the Amazon moved in swiftly, looming over her quarry like a cat with a mouse. "We know *how* you did it, Miss Lamb. Can you tell us *why*?"

PENELOPE LAMB'S PUDGY FACE TURNED apprehensively from the Lieutenant to Reggie, then back again. "I didn't want any part of it, Lieutenant. It wasn't my idea. Reggie set it up. All I did was — was —" A sudden sob choked off the words. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Lieutenant stooped beside the women's chair. "Miss Lamb, what was your relationship with the Martindews?"

"My — my mother —" The big body began to jerk spasmodically with a repressed sobbing. She blew her tears noisily into a tissue, and began again. "Mr. Martindew (Reggie and Nathan's father) was — was *my* father, too. My mother was housekeeper at the time, so — so it was all hushed up, for obvious reasons. He promised my mother that he would always look after me, even after his death. When — when my mother died, there was no legal claim, but he kept his word. But then, he — he died, and I went to see Nathan. Nathan just laughed at me. Ca — called the whole story a shallow fraud — that I was just — just —"

"But you found a ready ally in Reggie?"

"Y — yes. Reggie promised that if I did what he wanted me to, he — he would 'deal' me into the Martindew fortune — legally, when he became president. There was plenty for both of us, he said."

"That's preposterous." Reginald Martindew suddenly sprang to his own defense. "Why would I want Nathan dead, Lieutenant? I was already assured more money, in *half* the estate, than I could ever hope to spend."

The Lieutenant sat back on the edge of her desk and crossed one silken leg over the other. Mark noticed a small bruise on the ankle where little Reggie had vented his ire.

"The way I see it, Reginald Martindew, hate was your motive, not greed. Hate, for the man who (in your mind, at any rate) had robbed you of your heritage — your birthright. It had become, over the years, a driving, waking obsession. There could be no rest for you, no peace of mind, until your brother was dead and in his grave."

The little face on the too-big head was flushed with frustration. "I hope you're prepared to prove all this."

"Miss Lamb?" The Lieutenant's voice was suddenly as cold as a winter wind. "Is it your intention to be a patsy to this man's appalling hatred, to shoulder all the blame, while he goes on his lucrative way, free as a breeze? Or do you prefer to make a statement, tell the truth, and let the justice of your peers temper your punishment, and his, in a more equitable manner?"

The withering look that Penelope Lamb levelled at Reginald Martindew seemed to preclude the need for an answer, and to reduce the little man's irate pomposity to the figment of a Christmas wish.

"I — I'll make a statement," she said.

WHEN OFFICERS FISK AND MAYHEW HAD ESCORTED Metro's most unlikely looking pair of felons from the room, the Lieutenant regarded Drexler with an amused smile.

"What you said earlier, Mr. Drexler, about Penelope Lamb and the late Reggie Martin 'cooking something up together' has turned out to be strangely prophetic. But it wasn't quite what you had in mind, was it?"

The burly store detective rubbed his heavy jaw. "To tell you the truth, Lieutenant, I don't know how Nathan P. was murdered."

"Well, it was actually quite simple," said the Lieutenant as she resumed her seat behind the desk. "But it was only when we had established, unequivocally, that *no one* could have done it, that it became a little more obvious how someone *had*."

Mark grinned at Drexler. "Got another question?"

"Yeah. How was Nathan P. murdered?"

The Lieutenant took their sarcasm in good humor. "Well, it seemed to me that if some *one* could not have done it, then, *ipso facto*, it had to have been some *thing*. And the people who were best qualified to rig that exhibit were, of course, Penelope Lamb and little Reggie. No one else was even permitted in there."

"But you said you had all the elves checked out," Mark reminded her, "and that they hadn't been tampered with."

"Nor had they. But to be perfectly candid with you, it wasn't until about ten minutes ago that I realized precisely how they had accomplished it. Remember when little Reggie got his medallion caught on the arm of the captain's chair? It almost jerked his head off."

"That gave you the solution?"

"That *was* the solution. If the loop at the end of the four-foot nylon cord was not meant for the hand of an elf, then it must have been intended for something inanimate — some projection, perhaps, on the automated rocker."

"But —"

"Mr. Drexler, you attested to the fact that Penelope Lamb was the last one to leave the side of the victim. What appeared to you as 'last minute fussing' was, in fact, the surreptitious fitting of the deadly garrote around poor Santa's neck. The whiskers and the hair effectively hid the device, which was also white, once it was in place. Then, when she stooped behind the pedestal to switch on the mechanism, she simply slipped to loop on the end of the nylon cord over one of the protruding gargoyles."

"But surely," Mark protested, "Nathan would have known that something was happening. He would have been noticeably upset —"

"And so he was. But, unfortunately, he could only move his head. Drexler, who was at the 'drape switch' by the door, put it down to his usual feisty irascibility. The *Whistle While You Work* music would

easily have drowned out his actual words. And the facial whiskers, which were created purposefully by the conspirators themselves, would have hidden any recognizable expression on the face of the victim, then or later."

Dexler shook his head. "I still don't see —"

"The rocker, you will recall, moved from side to side, the pedestal did not. Once the loop was in place, the lateral movement of the rocker, combined with its jerking forward roll, would slowly tighten the garrote, cutting off the air supply to Santa's lungs. It is my guess that he was dead by nine-o-five, after the first fifteen-degree arc of the rocker. Then, as the rocker slowly returned to its starting position, the cord would slacken off, and the loop would eventually fall away from the gargoyle, leaving it to dangle aimlessly behind the rocker. And that of course, is precisely how we found it."

"Unbelievable," said Drexler. "Penny Lamb and little Reggie." He rose uncertainly to his feet. "Well, anyway, it puts me in the clear. Am I free to go now, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Mr. Drexler, you may go. But please keep yourself available. There'll be a preliminary hearing in a few days." When the store detective was half out the door, she added, "and Mr. Drexler, in the future, let us endeavor to keep our detective work separate from our sex life."

Drexler, with a red face, softly closed the door.

MARK LOOKED TO BE THOUGHTFULLY PREOCCUPIED as his senior partner tugged on a pair of fur-trimmed mukluks, checked the contents of her purse, and reached for her coat. "Before you go, Lieutenant," he said, "what was that ballyhoo about the fingerprints?"

Cathy Carruthers grinned. "I never did get around to saying whose they were, did I?"

"They were yours?"

"Uh-hh." She laughed. "Just a little Christmas humbug." She was half way across the room before she saw it. "What's that above the door?"

Mark had risen to his feet, blocking her exit. "Mistletoe," he said, without looking up. "It's a good thing Drexler didn't see it."

The Amazon moved in with a bedeviling smile. "Merry Christmas," she said.

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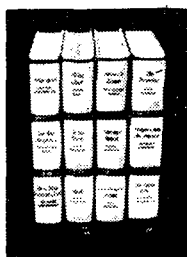
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Someone was trying to kill him, he was sure of it. Yet the cops insisted some sickie was just trying to scare him. Well, the man was succeeding in that all right. So far, he'd just been scared. But what about the next time?

The Next One's For Real

by MICHAEL SCOTT CAIN

"I TELL YOU, MARK, IT'S ASTONISHING," the little red-faced man said. "To think that just setting a few goals can do all that for you. Boy, I'm going to make some money this year for sure."

Not half as much as me, Mark Howell told himself as he leaned back and smiled at the group gathered around him. He almost felt ashamed of himself; he'd fired these people up so much that they'd insisted on going for a drink after the seminar session so they could keep the discussion going. If they only knew, Howell thought, careful to smile at them widely, that it was all positive thinking garbage, with nothing to it at all; they'd paid seven hundred dollars each for a seminar of worthless information that they could have gotten from a two and a quarter paperback. But it was business and his motto was get in, get the money, and get out quick. If they learned that, then their money was well spent.

He searched his memory for the man's name; if you wanted to sell a person, you used his name: made him feel like a friend.

The little man looked like he was dying. If you were dying you made a will. That was the name: Will Davidson.

"It's like I was saying at the seminar, Will, goal setting is the key, yes, but there's more to it than that. You have to line out a clear plan to get to those goals, a step by step plan. And you have to be ready to follow through."

"I know it," Davidson said, "and I believe it. Boy, if I don't set my

territory on fire this year....”

“It was really very valuable, Mr. Howell,” Gail Wyndham said. “I’m looking forward to the next two days. I know I’m going to learn a lot.”

Howell appreciated the girl’s youth, her fresh-scrubbed prettiness. As he smiled at her, a touch of desire, of longing, entered his mind. But he dismissed the thought; the self-improvement seminar business was much too good to take a chance on blowing the whole thing just for an evening with a pretty girl. Even one who fawned over him as openly as this one did.

“Thanks, Gail. I hope the seminar’s as valuable as you feel it’s going to be.”

“Valuable?” Davidson said. “I’m going to get rich this year.”

Another man — Jackson, same as Stonewall, Howell remembered — called out, “If Davidson spent as much time making calls as he did talking about how rich he was going to get, he’d already be rich.”

Howell laughed along with the rest. When the laughter faded, he glanced at his watch and said, “Well, tomorrow’s a long day. I’d better hit it.”

Davidson insisted the others stay for one more round so Howell said goodnight and left the bar.

AFTER THE COMFORT OF THE BAR, THE NIGHT WAS HOT, almost oppressive. When he got into his car, Howell turned the air conditioner up to high. As he reached over to roll up his window, he heard a sound outside and felt a presence. When he looked up to see what it was, he focussed on a gun. It was huge, seemed to fill the window. He froze.

“Oh, my God. Look, my wallet’s in my coat. You can have the money. Just don’t shoot me.”

The gunman was short and well-muscled, so that for a crazy moment Howell wondered if he lifted weights. He had a dark beard and wore wire-rimmed glasses.

“I’m going to get my wallet now, OK? Nothing sudden, no tricks or anything. I’m just going after the wallet.”

The bearded man pulled the trigger.

The click was incredibly loud.

Howell screamed as the man walked calmly away, disappearing into the night. His nerves tightened even more, causing his skin to feel hot and swollen. He saw perspiration on his arm. Finally, a wave of relief surged through him and he slumped in the seat. Thank god, he said silently, the gun misfired.

But the fear grew again, held him even tighter than before: the gun had *not* misfired. The bearded man would have been surprised by something like that, would have reacted in some way. Certainly, he would have pulled the trigger again. *Somebody had deliberately stuck an empty gun into his face and pulled the trigger.* But who? Why?

As he saw for the first time how fragile and unprotected he was, how his life was no more important to that guy than an empty beer can that you just threw away, he felt anger; it mingled with his fear, making him almost feverish. He could have been killed just then. All it would have taken was some whimsical thought on the part of the bearded man, some touch of desire, and Howell would be dead. It wasn't right. He resented it.

As he drove away, he passed a few people on the sidewalks and wondered if one of them had been the gunman. He speeded up, feeling eyes watching him.

A phone booth was at the next intersection. When he stopped at it to look up the address of the police station, he felt vulnerable and exposed, almost expecting a gun at his neck. Quickly, he memorized the address and scurried back to the car, tense until he was driving again.

THE POLICE STATION WAS A SQUAT MODERN BUILDING with lots of dark corners for a murderer to be hiding behind. He ran inside and blurted out that somebody had tried to kill him. A uniformed cop led him back to the detective division.

"Wait here." The cop pointed out a bench. "Somebody'll be with you in a minute."

He waited.

"You Howell?"

He looked up. "Yes."

"My name's Boyle. I'm a detective."

Boyle, Howell thought automatically, you boil water. The detective offered to shake hands. Howell stared at his hand as though it held a gun.

"Relax, Mr. Howell," the detective said, "You're all right here. Come on over to my desk."

He was soft, at least twenty-five pounds overweight and walked as if his feet hurt. Howell hadn't known what to expect from a detective, but this sure wasn't it.

"A man just tried to kill me," he said, when they were seated. "Well, actually, he didn't try to kill me. At least, I don't think he did."

Or maybe....”

“Mr. Howell, you want to just settle down and tell me what happened?”

“A man thrust a gun in my face and pulled the trigger. The gun was empty.”

“Yeah? Where’d this happen? Tell me everything you can.”

As Howell described the incident, Boyle poured them both coffee. The detective dumped two spoons of sugar in his and tasted it. A trace of a frown crossed his face and he looked longingly at the sugar bowl, but after a glance down at his belly, he shook his head and settled for the coffee as it was.

“Maybe one of your friends has a weird sense of humor?” he suggested after Howell finished speaking.

“But I don’t know anybody in this city. I’m just here for three days, doing a goal-setting seminar.”

“A what?”

“It’s a technique for salespeople. Goal setting. You just decide on your goals, long range and short term, focus on them, and work out a plan for reaching them. It’s simple, but very effective.” He felt comfortable talking about the familiar. “Actually, it isn’t just for salespeople. You could probably find a lot of uses for it in police work.”

“We’ll have to talk about that some time,” Boyle said dryly. “Right now, though, you can’t think of anybody who’d want to pull a prank like this?”

“It wasn’t a prank.”

“Whatever. Who’d want to do it?”

“Look, Mr. Boyle, I’m forty-five. I have a wife, two kids, a home in the suburbs, and a business. I don’t know a soul here and I don’t move in any kind of strange circles. I’m just Mr. Ordinary Guy. There’s no reason for any of this at all.”

Boyle scribbled in his notebook. Putting his pencil down, he said, “It’s a weird world out there, Mr. Howell. It’s filled with weird people. You just had a run-in with a sickie, that’s all.”

“You’re not going to do anything?”

“What can I tell you? We’ll look around. We’ll put the word out. But when consider that nothing really happened, there’s not a whole lot we can do.”

“Look, Boyle, somebody stuck a gun in my face!”

“But he didn’t shoot you. Go on home, Mr. Howell. It’s scary and unfortunate, but it’s over.”

As Howell left the office, he heard the detective sigh deeply. He looked back over his shoulder and saw Boyle add two more spoons of

sugar to his coffee.

As soon as he closed the motel room door behind him the phone rang.

"Howell?"

He didn't know the voice. "Yes?"

"It could have been loaded."

THE SEMINAR WENT TERRIBLY. HOWELL KEPT LOOKING out over the crowd, expecting at any second to be shot. He spoke automatically, reciting his goal-setting litany so mechanically that he felt like a tape recorder. He couldn't help it though; right now his only goal was to keep from being shot.

On the lunch break, he decided to go to a good restaurant. As he opened his car, he saw a note taped to the steering wheel:

MAYBE THERE'S A BOMB UNDER THE HOOD

The police checked it out. The car was clean.

"Look, you've got to do something."

Boyle added sugar to his coffee. Without even bothering to taste it, he poured in some more. "How's the pastry here?"

"Pastry? Somebody's trying to kill me and you're talking about pastry?"

"Mr. Howell, there wasn't any bomb. Now what do you want me to do?"

"Trace the note. Can't you trace the note?"

"You know something? I hate TV. Ever since cop shows on TV, everybody thinks he knows how to do my job. I suppose you want me to find the typewriter with just the right letter chipped?"

"You're pretty casual about this."

"You know how many typewriters there are in this city?"

"Somebody's trying to kill me."

"Wrong. Some sickie's trying to scare you. There's a big difference between being scared and being dead." He finished off his coffee and stood. "Try to stay out of trouble, Mr. Howell."

HOWELL'S HANDS WERE SHAKING.

"Are you all right, Mr. Howell?" Gail said as she slid into the chair the detective had vacated.

"Oh, hello, Gail."

"You look worried."

"It's OK. He watched her red hair reflect the light. She couldn't be

more than twenty-five. If he got killed, he'd never be able to spend time with anybody as bright and enthusiastic as her again. He wouldn't be seeing his family anymore either. "This thing has me kind of upset."

"I think it's terrible, Mr. Howell. The police ought to do something. I heard something happened last night too."

"A man with a gun."

"Why don't you just go on home? Call off the rest of the seminar and go on home."

With Gail across from him, Howell felt relaxed, as if the scare had been a long time ago. "I wish I could. But I'm committed here."

"Break the commitment."

"I can't. There's a contract. These people paid good money, a lot of money, for this seminar. If I just took the money and didn't follow through, I'd be out of business for sure."

"The old follow-through, huh?" she said with a smile.

"I guess. But if word got around that I didn't deliver, I'd be through. People pay for performance, not excuses."

"I suppose you're right. Besides, it's so valuable and you teach it so well."

"I'm going to have a drink, Gail. Join me?"

"A bloody mary would be just right about now."

The drink continued into a refill and then a third one. Howell began feeling warm, expansive, in control again. Gail carried the conversation. She was a good sales rep, he noted; she saw just what he needed and delivered.

"I'm telling you, Mr. Howell, the whole idea of a planned approach, a goals approach to sales is amazing. To decide where you want to be in ten years and then make a plan to get there... Why, I never knew you could do something like that."

"I'd've thought you were well up on your goals, Gail. You're a very organized young lady."

"Oh, I've just sort of spaced around. But now that I know the possibilities, you just watch."

"The old income's going jump, huh? Just like Davidson's?"

"Maybe not like Davidson." she laughed, "I'm not that much of a dreamer." Concern showed in her face. "Are you feeling any better?"

"I'm fine." He was surprised to realize he meant it; he *was* fine. Boyle had been right. It was just some sickie pulling a prank. "Let's get on back."

That night he decided to stay in his room. He'd just call home, have a couple of drinks while he planned the next day, and get a good

night's sleep. He called down for dinner and a bucket of ice.

When the knock came at the door, he stiffened. "Who is it?"

"Room service."

"Just a minute."

He unlocked the door and pulled it open. The bearded man shoved the gun into his face and pulled the trigger.

Howell's scream drowned out the click.

AT SEVEN IN THE MORNING, THE PHONE RANG. He answered it groggily. His eyes hurt from tiredness; he hadn't been able to get to sleep until long after Boyle had left.

"Next time it won't be empty," he voice said.

"What? Who is this?"

"The next time is for real, Howell."

"Answer me. Who is this?"

"You want to die, Howell?"

"What? No. I don't want to die. Who is this? What do you want from me?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"What? I don't understand."

"For ten thousand dollars you can live."

"I demand to know who this is."

"This is the man who could have killed you three times already. The next time's for real. Now the question is do you want to live?"

"Yes."

"Ten thousand in cash. Leave it on the front seat of your car when you go into that meeting of yours. No need to get fancy about this. Just leave it in a paper bag."

"I can't raise that kind of money."

"You can if you want to live. And Howell? That fat cop can't help you. Nobody can help you. I know your every move. I know your routine. One step out of the ordinary and it's for real."

"But I'm telling you, I don't have that kind of money."

"Your bank has a branch office here. It opens at eight-thirty. Get the money out of your savings account."

"You know where I bank?"

"Of course. You think I'm just messing around here? I know where you bank and where you live and where your kids go to school, where your wife shops. You'd be amazed what I know about you, Howell. So if you don't do what I say, you die. And after you're gone, you'll never know what happens to your wife and kids."

"You're crazy."

"Howell, are you sure you want to irritate me by saying things like that? I think an apology is in order."

"Look, whoever you are..."

"I want an apology, Howell."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. Now I'll be looking for that money this morning. Just leave it on the seat. And if that fat cop is anywhere in the area, you die. Remember, next time's for real."

FROM THE MOMENT HE LEFT THE BANK, HE FELT the bearded man watching him. He held the money slightly away from his body as he walked back to the car so the gunman would know he was following instructions.

Boyle leaned against his car. Get away, Howell screamed silently, you'll get me killed.

"Morning, Mr. Howell."

"Boyle..."

"Just wanted to make sure you're all right."

"I'm fine. Everything's fine."

"Good, I was on my way to your place when I spotted your car here." As the cop spoke, Howell's nerve endings tensed. "Wanted you to know we're going to be real close by today. Three times is too much. I want to put this sickie away."

"No, look, Boyle, it's all right. I'm going home this morning. So it'll be fine. You don't have to worry."

"Howell, you haven't wanted me ten feet away since you hit this town. Now you can't wait to get rid of me. What's going on?"

The bearded man could hear them; Howell was certain of that. "Nothing's going on. I'm just going home, so he won't be able to bother me anymore. All I've got to do is wrap up the session and I'm on my way. It's on follow-through."

"On what?"

"Follow-through. All I have to tell them is that they've got to follow-through and I'm on my way home. Fifteen minutes, that's all."

"Maybe I'll just hang around, make sure you get off safely."

"It's not necessary. You were right all along. It's a crank, that's all."

Boyle glanced out over Howell's shoulder. Howell was sure he'd spotted the bearded man. He felt himself dying.

"Well," the detective said slowly, "If you're sure you're all right."

"I'm fine. Really."

Boyle waved goodbye as he walked back to his car. Howell's pulse raced. He forced himself to calm down as he drove to the seminar center.

As he parked, Gail walked over to him. "Mr. Howell? A man just asked me to give you this note."

It was handwritten:

YOU HANDLED THAT FINE. LET'S GET IT FINISHED.

"Mr. Howell, are you all right?"

"Yeah."

"But you look sick."

"I'll be fine. Let's go in. I want to get this over with so I can get home."

"Good idea. You look like you could use some rest."

WHILE HE TOLD THEM ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE of following-through, told them that goal setting and planning were worthless unless they were willing to do whatever was needed to follow-through, he thought of the bag of money. What if the wrong person got it? What if some wino saw it and took it before the bearded man got there? No, that wasn't possible. The bearded man had been watching him all morning. The money was gone already.

"So remember," he concluded, "follow-through is what separates the winners from the losers. You've got to go all out, give it everything you've got. You can't let a thing come between you and your goals. Thank you."

Ignoring the confused murmurs from the crowd, he rushed out to his car. The bag was gone. He sighed, feeling safe for the first time in days.

As he pulled out of the lot, he saw Gail standing in the doorway. He waved to her.

"See you next trip, Gail."

"Thanks for the seminar," she called out. "It was very helpful."

"Glad you liked it."

"Get in, get the money, and get out quick? Wasn't that what you said?"

He grinned, loving the admiration he saw in her face. "That's the whole program, all right."

He was out on the highway before he realized she'd had a paper bag in her hand.

Her face was a death-mask, white and bloodless, with hollow eye-sockets and grinning jaws. Her blood covered him, and he had to hold her dead, mangled body for twelve hours until they dug him out!

The Bun Man

by LEE DUIGON

HARLEY COUNTED HIMSELF LUCKY to have so many friends.

There was his oldest friend, Mrs. Hansen, in whose house he kept his room, and her mynah bird, Fritz, who talked with him when nobody else was home. And there was Mr. Barger, his boss at the Big Barn, where he had served up hamburgers, hot dogs, fries, and subs to the hungry students of State U. for over five years now.

But his best friends were the boys from Delta Sigma Nu — great guys, every one. They reminded Harley of his old buddies in Company H, before the night Saigon exploded on them.

Harley would do anything for the boys in Delta Sigma Nu. Hadn't they made him an honorary fraternity member? Mr. Barger wouldn't have liked it if he'd known Harley sometimes prepared special orders for his frat brothers — a hamburger with a pinch of good hash, for instance — but he'd never find out. Harley liked Mr. Barger, but it was okay to fool him a little if it meant pleasing his brothers a lot. And if anybody had ever received a "Harley Special" that hadn't been intended for him, he wasn't complaining. Things like that went on all the time in this Michigan college town.

HARLEY COULDN'T HAVE BEEN HAPPIER. WELL, ALMOST. Mrs. Hansen and Fritz seemed jealous of his friendship with the boys.

"Harley," she would say, "you shouldn't spend so much time with those boys. They're young enough to be your kids! It isn't seemly. Besides, I don't believe they mean to do well by you."

Harley never got mad at Mrs. Hansen. She was like a mother to him, and she meant well. Mothers always disapproved of a fellow's buddies. Harley's real mother, who had died some years ago, never liked any of his friends.

Fritz was more outspoken, but Harley knew a bird couldn't be expected to understand people. Not even a smart bird like Fritz.

Harley went to all the fraternity parties and had a great time. Delta Sigma Nu had a grill in its kitchen just like the one at the Big Barn, and he spent many a happy hour whipping up burgers for the guys and their dates. If they had a laugh on him now and then, he didn't mind. He liked to cheer people.

THAT'S HOW IT WAS IN THE ARMY. They called him Moon Man then. The fellows were always pulling practical jokes on him, spooking him with rubber snakes (and sometimes real ones), disappearing combat boots, and other harmless pranks. But any one of them would have died for him, and Harley knew it.

Sometimes he liked to look back on those good old Army days, but he had to be careful. If he didn't stop it in time, his memory would run on until it reached that night when the brothel dissolved in smoke and flame, and he lay under the rubble with a dead girl in his arms until they dug him out twelve hours later. Then he'd get the blues, in spite of his medicine.

He could still hear Hoskins muttering, sometimes: "We always liked you, Harley." Hoskins, with his arms and legs torn off by the force of the explosion.

Most of the time, however, Harley didn't get the blues. The medicine took care of that, and he had a nice, easy life. Dropping out of school had been a good move on his part. He hadn't been up to it.

Nobody had worked at the Big Barn longer than Harley, not even Mr. Barger. Grill men and cashiers, clean-up boys and waitresses, they came and went while Harley stayed. He was friends with all of them.

HE WAS WIPING DOWN THE GRILL ONE DAY, WHISTLING, when Frankie Riccio came in for his Special. Harley served it himself.

"Gonna be a big party Friday night, Harley," Riccio said. "Can you make it?"

"Sure, Frankie, I'm off that night," Harley said; he was always off Friday nights. "Want me to bring anything?"

"Just bring your silly old self," Frankie smiled, as Harley rang up the sale with a wink. Frankie winked back and was gone.

Harley told Fritz all about it the next morning, when he got up to change the water in the cage. The mynah was in another of his know-it-all moods.

"You're just jealous because they never invite you," Harley said.

But the bird tried another tack. If Harley's frat brothers were such great pals of his, why didn't they ever fix him up with a girl?

"A girl?" Harley was taken by surprise. "Well, I . . . for Pete's sake, Fritz, what would I do with a girl?"

Fritz reminded him what he could do with a girl.

"I never asked 'em to find me a girl," Harley explained. "I'll bet they would, if I asked. I'll just bet they would!"

Fritz doubted it. For a bird, he could be a real pain.

BUT THE SEED HAD BEEN PLANTED. Of course there were girls at the parties — good, clean American girls who brushed their teeth and went to church, who kissed the frat boys and wouldn't think of setting them up to die in a plastique explosion.

They were beautiful — too beautiful. If the doctors had told Harley once, they'd told him a thousand times that the girls in the brothel hadn't wanted it blown up, hadn't led his buddies into a trap. After all, they'd been killed and maimed in the explosion, too, hadn't they?

Harley knew this with the smart part of his mind, but there was another part he knew he had to watch out for. Harley smiled at the girls and took their gentle teasing in stride, wondering what it would be like to love a girl again; but there was another Harley who came up with the blues, who was born in the explosion and just might never die. The last time his other self came out of the darkness, Harley'd had to drop out of college and stay in the hospital a long time until the doctors found the right medicine — and that, of course, was the last time he'd been alone with a girl.

Even so, it seemed so long ago.

HARLEY TRIED TO ENJOY THE PARTY, but Fritz had spoiled everything. Now he really noticed the girls — their long hair, flashing eyes, and tantalizing curves wrapped in clinging football jerseys. He was the only brother in the house without a date. He felt the blues coming on, and fought them off. That must never happen here.

"What's the matter, Harley?" one of the brothers, Rick Mathieson, asked. "Something eating you?"

"I just don't feel so good, Rick," he said.

"Get off that grill and tell me all about it."

Mathieson flagged down Riccio and fat Floyd Gardiner, and they went out onto the porch for a huddle. Floyd draped his arm around Harley's shoulders and pressed a cold beer into his hands.

"Now, what's wrong with the world's greatest bun man?" Mathieson demanded.

"Yeah, you look kinda down," Riccio agreed.

"Don't mind me," Harley said. "I'll be all right. You fellas enjoy the party."

"Hey!" Floyd said, thumping Harley on the chest. "We're all brothers, right? When you got a problem, we got a problem. You have no choice — you gotta tell us about it."

SOMETIMES, WHEN THE BLUES WERE THREATENING, Harley developed a stammer. He knew, however, that if he were able to control the stammer, the blues wouldn't come. With Floyd's arm around him and the other guys crowded up close, he felt secure. Still, he had to choose his words with care. He couldn't afford to stutter.

"Do you think," he asked slowly, "you guys might be able to fix me up with a girl? Everybody has a date but me."

The brothers had a good laugh.

"Is that all that's bugging you?" Riccio cried, poking Harley in the ribs. "You old goat! You shoulda told us long ago. Of course you want a girl! Every guy should have a girl."

"Brothers," Mathieson said, "we gotta find a girl for old Harley. What kinda girl you got in mind, pal?"

Harley felt better now. He was blushing.

"Be specific!" Floyd commanded. "You are a member of Delta Sigma Nu, and you can have any girl you want! We'll take care of it for you."

"I like blondes best," Harley said.

"Then a blonde it shall be!" Riccio proclaimed. "Next party, old man, you shall have a blonde of your very own."

Geez, they were great guys.

HARLEY COULD BARELY KEEP HIS MIND ON HIS WORK, he was in such a dither waiting for the next party. Fortunately, he had been on the job for so long, he could do almost anything without having to think about it. And did he enjoy throwing it back into Fritz's face! For once the bird had nothing to say.

"Harley, you look like the cat who ate the canary," Mrs. Hansen said, when she returned from her bridge club one afternoon. "What're you up to?"

He hadn't meant to tell Mrs. Hansen. Mothers always dump on a guy's girlfriends. But he was too excited not to tell.

"Oh, Harley!" she wailed. "You can't do that! Don't you remember

what happened last time?"

It was just like Mrs. Hansen to think that because of one bad thing that had happened years ago, Harley could never have a date again. Now she'd tell the doctors, and there'd be trouble.

"I guess you mean I can't go," he said. "I guess you mean I got to sit here every night and never have fun."

"You know that isn't true, Harley," she replied. "I just don't want to see you hurt, that's all."

As he always did when he let Mrs. Hansen have her way, but didn't want to say so, Harley retreated to his room and slammed the door. He was glad he hadn't told her when he was supposed to have his date.

HER NAME WAS CELIA, AND SHE WAS A KNOCKOUT. She wasn't just a blonde: she was a movie star, a queen, an impossible dream come true. To Harley, she was a goddess — infinitely desirable, yet infinitely perilous.

"Hello, Harley," she said, after Riccio had introduced them.

"Never let it be said," Floyd cried, raising a mug of beer like a ceremonial mace, "that the brothers of Delta Sigma Nu fail in their promises!"

"Well, bun man, what do you think?" Riccio demanded. "Is that a blonde, or is that a blonde?"

"And she's all yours," Mathieson added.

Harley's pulse quickened. She was made for loving, this girl; her faded jeans and her soft plaid shirt, open at the neck, seemed to ripple ecstatically over her body. It occurred to Harley that if he were that shirt, he'd cling a lot tighter. He imagined the shirt wrapping itself around the girl's body, pressing itself to every inch of smooth skin, tighter and tighter around her neck . . .

"I've heard so much about you," Celia purred, stepping up close and fingering his lapel. "I've heard you make the best burgers in town. Why don't you grill one up for me — sort of break the ice?"

HARLEY LED THE WAY TO THE KITCHEN, where he tore the apron from its peg on the wall and hopped to work on the grill. Everything had to be perfect, but no fear — he was in his element.

"You're an artist on the grill, Harley," Celia said.

"He really is good," Mathieson agreed, as if noticing Harley's skills for the first time.

He put the finishing touches on the burgers and they took them up to the living room, where the rest of the party flowed around them. Celia

sat close to him on the sofa, leaning into him in a way that set his heart humming like a tuning fork.

"Well," she said at last, "the brothers have set aside a room for us to be alone together. I'll go on ahead to freshen up. You make sure you come up in fifteen minutes, Harley."

"We'll see that he gets there," Floyd promised.

Harley's eyes followed her across the room and up the stairs.

"Look at him," Mathieson said. "He's getting cold feet."

Harley started, then shook his head vigorously.

"I'm just fine," he said.

"Better have a beer while you're waiting," Riccio suggested.

"You're a lucky man, pal. I wish I was in your shoes; but once we told her about you, she wouldn't look at anybody else."

Harley counted the minutes, one by one, until it was time to go.

"Make sure you get the right room — 206," Floyd reminded him.

"You don't want to bust in on another couple."

Chanting the room number under his breath, Harley mounted the stairs and came to the second floor hallway. The lights were dim, and the carpet muffled his footsteps. When he reached the correct door, he wiped the sweat from his palms and knocked.

"Come in," a voice replied, "and close the door behind you."

The lights were out and the shades were drawn. The room was so dark that Harley couldn't see his date, but he heard her breathing a step or two away. A pair of unseen lips touched his and begged him to undress. He almost stumbled getting out of his pants. Then a warm hand slid into his own and guided him to the bed.

"Hurry up!" a husky female voice whispered. "I'm ready!"

Harley needed no further encouragement. He was winning — the doctors had carefully explained to him about the bad part of his mind, and now it couldn't take him by surprise. It would have to sit and growl impotently while Harley enjoyed himself with a woman for the first time since Nam.

Some things you never forget. He came to a panting finish just as the light exploded over his head and a cheer burst from the brothers assembled in the hallway.

He looked, and it wasn't Celia on the bed beneath him. Her face had turned into a death-mask, white and bloodless, with hollow eye-sockets and grinning jaws.

He was back in Saigon again, back in the ratty little room with moldy walls, back on the buggy mattress with the skinny girl who had such big, brown eyes.

The room turned into a blast that hit him from all sides, pressing the

girl into him, throwing the ceiling into their faces and the floor into their backs, burning, passing beyond sound into a strange silence that left him lying in the dark with the girl's body in his arms and her blood sticking to his face. When they finally dug him out, her mangled grin was the first thing he saw

HE WAS SCREAMING WHEN HE WOKE IN THE INFIRMARY with a doctor and a nurse standing over him. The nurse injected a sedative, and he began to wonder where he was. Soon he recognized Dr. Powell.

"Everything's okay, Harley," the doctor reassured him. "You're all right. You'll be able to go home soon."

Harley was confused.—

"The girl . . . Celia . . ."

"I'm afraid you were the victim of a tasteless prank," Dr. Powell said, "although in all fairness to the fraternity, they didn't know the girl was going to make herself up like that. She's a student in the drama department. However, Dean Finlay tells me the fraternity is in a lot of trouble. But you never told those boys what happened to you in the Army, did you?"

Harley shook his head. The sedative was making him groggy.

"I told them all about it," the doctor said, "and they're very sorry. They didn't know what they were doing. Maybe it would be best for you to try to forgive and forget."

"Sure, doc," Harley agreed. "Anything you say."

HARLEY RESTED FOR A WEEK. Mrs. Hansen stayed home from her clubs and took care of him, and Fritz laid off from saying I-told-you-so. But he never talked when Mrs. Hansen was home, anyway.

When Harley was able to return to work, Mrs. Hansen went back to her bridge game and Fritz started talking again. The bird admitted he'd been wrong to goad Harley into asking the boys to find him a date, but never mind — the girl had gotten them into trouble. You could never trust girls, could you?

Harley had to admit you couldn't.

They think they can get away with anything, don't they? Fritz asked. They sure do, Harley agreed, and told him all about Celia.

Fritz had plans for Celia. She'd learn she couldn't get away with a trick like that.

Delta Sigma Nu was placed on probation, but nobody was expelled from school. Two brothers came by the Big Barn one night to apologize, but no more Harley Specials were served.

But they kept his name on the rolls, and when the end of the term

rolled around, Riccio showed up to invite Harley to a party they planned to hold in his honor.

"We know we can never make it up to you," he said, "but it would mean a lot to us if you'd come to this party."

"What the hell," Harley said, "why not?"

This time, Harley didn't tell Mrs. Hansen about the party. Instead, he followed the bird's advice faithfully. Hadn't Fritz told him what to do?

But the rest of the plan was Harley's own, and he was proud of his ingenuity. He'd surprise Fritz. The bird couldn't follow him to the cellar during the day when Mrs. Hansen was out, and so didn't know that Harley had been fibbing.

THE BROTHERS GAVE HARLEY THREE CHEERS WHEN HE arrived that Friday night. Because of the probation, they hadn't been able to party for many weeks. They needed special permission from the dean to stage this wingding.

"What's in that big old box you got there?" Floyd wanted to know.

"Burgers and buns," Harley said. "What else?"

"No way!" Riccio said. "You're the guest of honor, Harley. This time, we cook for you."

"But I like to cook, Frankie," Harley replied. "I made these burgers special for you guys."

Riccio's eyes lit up.

"I haven't had a Harley Special in a dog's age!" he exclaimed.

"Then you're in for a treat," Harley smiled.

Harley went to work in the kitchen, pouring seltzer on the grill to get it sparkling clean. Upstairs, the music was on full blast. Harley danced a little as he slapped the patties down and broke out the chopped onions.

All the brothers agreed that these were the best burgers they'd ever tasted, and soon the box was empty. There were some questions, however, when nobody got high.

"Gee, I don't taste any hash," Riccio observed.

"No hash?" Floyd whined.

"Not this time," Harley said. "This is a new recipe, and I'm proud of it. I had to work on it at home, because I didn't want Mrs. Hansen to see I was working on something special for you guys. She'd make a fuss. "I only had one problem — couldn't use all the meat. let me show you the leftovers."

Harley reached into the box and pulled out a severed human head.

"Brothers," he said, "say hello to Celia."

Small thefts were best. Barbara's healthy bank account was proof of that. And now here was another opportunity, and the price was right — for a woman without scruples!

A Real Phony

by DOV BEN-GALIL

IT HAD ACTUALLY BEEN QUITE A GOOD RACKET, and practically foolproof.

Had Barbara ever dipped her well-manicured hands into the till for as much as \$25, the bank examiners would have caught her in a flash.

Instead, she decided to go for the small change — and not to steal it from the bank, but from its customers.

In a rich town like Yardley, Pa., very few people bother to count the dimes and nickels a bank teller hands them and Barbara's method reduced that small number to a bare minimum.

She would simply plop the change on the counter and then start counting the bills. Most people watched as she counted them out. Some even counted them afterwards themselves, but almost no one bothered to look at the small change.

Some of the men, of course, never bothered to count anything; they were too busy looking into Barbara's blue eyes or imagining running their hands through her very natural blonde hair. Still, even with these customers, Barbara never took more than twenty or twenty-five cents. There was no reason to get greedy — not when the small change was giving almost twenty dollars day.

IT WAS A SMALL PART OF HER CHANGE MONEY — \$29,943 in six years — which had financed her trip to Europe and placed her in the first class train compartment running from Verona to Nice.

"I hope you don't mind if I start up a conversation with you," said the man sitting opposite her. "I've been trying to think up a good opening since we pulled out, but I'm afraid that I couldn't come up with anything particularly imaginative."

Barbara smiled. She had expected him to try to talk to her; men usually did. He was far from what she considered her type — thin, with glasses, balding and fortyish — but there was no one else in the cabin and it promised to be a dull trip if she remained silent.

"No," she said. "I don't mind at all. My name is Barbara. I'm American."

"Only an American identifies himself by his country," laughed the man, "but I like it. I'm Howard. I live in Cape Town."

She gave him a puzzled look and he added, "South Africa."

"Really?" she said. "That's fascinating. What are you doing here?"

"Work," Howard answered. "And yourself?"

"Oh, just a vacation," she said.

"A vacation? That calls for a celebration. How about if I call the conductor and have him bring in some wine for us?"

"Well," Barbara said, "I don't really know...."

"Don't be silly," Howard told her. "What kind of damage can result from a bottle of wine — especially one shared by two people?"

Barbara laughed and gave in. The conductor, after being slipped a few francs, brought in a Rhine wine and opened it for them.

THE CONVERSATION FLOWED BETWEEN THEM, oiled, no doubt, by the several glasses of wine each had consumed. Barbara, used to the much stronger American cocktails, felt no effects from the drinks. Howard, however, was obviously not much of a drinker and seemed a bit tipsy before the bottle was even half-killed. By the time it was gone, he was definitely over his limit.

"You know," he told Barbara, "you are without a doubt the single most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life."

It never fails; Barbara thought to herself. Men talk about women losing their inhibitions when drunk, but give a man enough alcohol and even a Caspar Milquetoast will suddenly think he's Don Juan. And Don Juan was not what she wanted — not from a man who looked like Howard.

She decided to handle him like she would one of her over-amorous married customers at the bank.

"I'll bet that's just your standard way of talking to a woman," she said with a laugh.

"Standard?" he asked. "I'll show you how standard it is."

He reached for his briefcase, opened it, and took out a small envelope — no bigger than a postage stamp. Handing it to Barbara, he said, "A woman as beautiful as you should have only beautiful things to adorn her. I think you will find that a jeweler can make a very nice pin or ring from this."

She opened the package and was startled to see a diamond inside!

"You can't be serious," she said. "You don't even know me."

"But I would like to," Howard said. "And what better way to make certain that you don't just forget me among the thousands of other men you run into in your life?"

"Is it — is it real?" she asked.

"Almost," he chuckled, "But not quite."

"What do you mean?"

"It's called 'cubic zirconia' — have you ever heard of it?"

"No," Barbara admitted.

"It's artificial — made from petrochemicals. But it's almost impossible to detect."

"Even by a jeweler?" she asked.

"Even by a jeweler," he said. "You see, diamonds are formed by putting coal under a million pounds of pressure for a million years. Coal is made of hydrocarbons, and so is oil. Cubic Zirconia merely speeds up the process chemically."

"But it can't be exactly the same as diamonds," Barbara said.

"No," Howard conceded. "For one thing, it's somewhat heavier — about 25%. With a big stone, say two carats, a jeweler will notice the difference, but a small diamond weighs so little anyway, that the difference can't be detected."

"You said 'for one thing,'" Barbara pushed. "What other differences are there?"

"Only one," said Howard. "It is not quite as hard as a diamond. Oh, it's hard enough to cut glass, all right, but a diamond is the hardest mineral in the world. It's number '10' on what is called the 'hardness scale' — cubic zirconia is 8.5, so close that no jeweler will spot it."

"Is the cubic zirconia very expensive?" she asked.

"The stone I gave you is .5 carat," Howard said. "If it were a diamond, it would cost about \$1,500 given its purity and its color. The zirconia stone retails at about \$30, but costs me only \$1 to make."

"What stops people from selling them as diamonds then?" she asked.

"Oh, they do," he answered. "But not very often. You see, the big stones are detected too easily. The weight difference, for one thing, for another the degree of their purity. Very few large diamonds are that pure. It's enough to make any jeweler a bit suspicious unless the diamond is brought to him by a person he knows to be very wealthy.

"The small ones are actually rather hard to come by," he went on, "although I do have a few with me here. These are the ones which are usually sold as diamonds, but even that's not too often. It's foolish to risk jail for a small profit."

Barbara remembered how often she had made small thefts from her customers and how they had added up. Small thefts are the best, she felt, because they're generally never noticed. Howard's briefcase could give her a good future, she decided — if he were not exaggerating.

WHEN HOWARD ASKED IF HE COULD MEET HER in Nice, as she knew he would, she agreed to a date for the next night. Before then, however, she went to a jeweler.

"A friend gave me this diamond," she said, "and I'd like to have it set into a ring."

"Certainly, mademoiselle," the jeweler said, showing her a number of settings.

"Perhaps this isn't nice," she confessed as she chose one, "but I'm dying to know what he paid for it. Can you give me an estimate?"

The jeweler looked at the stone through his eye piece and told her, "It's a very nice diamond — almost flawless. It's rather small, but a diamond this good should retail for around \$1,500."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "My girlfriend says this is a phony. She doesn't think the diamond is real."

"Mademoiselle," said the jeweler, "I have been in this business for fifteen years. I know the difference between a diamond and a piece of glass."

Barbara smiled, paid for her ring, and left.

BARBARA HAD NEVER CONSIDERED HERSELF A SEDUCTRESS — it had always been the men who had chased her. That evening, however, she set the scene as carefully as Mata Hari might have. When Howard met her at her hotel room, she told him she would rather have dinner there, that she had arranged for room service to send it up. She included wine and cocktails with the order — she had

seen alcohol's effect on Howard and wanted to make certain he was really high this time.

The effect was what she had planned, and Howard was, if not falling down drunk, at least at the point where his judgment was impaired. If really given her way, Barbara might have preferred that more than his judgment be impaired, but she realized that Howard's having a very enjoyable night with her would seal the bargain. But, she was determined, business first.

"How many small stones do you have with you?" she asked.

"None here," he said, "but I have three or four in my briefcase in the hotel safe. Why?"

"I want to buy them from you," Barbara said. "I also want you to send me another 100 or so."

"What in God's name for?" Howard asked.

"I'm going to sell them," Barbara said. "One at a time, in jewelry stores in the States."

"That's ridiculous," Howard said.

"No it isn't. In fact, it's going to be perfectly safe. I'll put the zirconia in a ring and then take it to a jeweler. I won't say what it costs; I'll let the jeweler tell me what it's worth. I'll just say it was my engagement ring, but I've busted up with my fiancé and want to sell it. If the jeweler discovers that it's not real, I'll just curse my old boyfriend and leave."

"Honey," Howard said, "You've got some mind, but are you ready to try it on something bigger?"

"What do you mean?"

"I lied," Bob said. "That diamond I gave you today was not a phony. It was the real thing."

"What?"

"Oh, everything I told you about cubic zirconia is true. It's my business, I should know. But what I have with me are all real diamonds."

"Then why did you give me one?"

"Because they're worthless. At least right now. Do you remember reading about the diamond exchange theft in Tel Aviv?"

"Something about it," she said. "There was a switch made and it wasn't discovered for several days."

"Exactly," Howard answered. "I made the switch, or at least a friend did with my help. He works there, and described the diamonds to me — I then duplicated them in my zirconia plant. My friend switched them and that's what I have in my briefcase."

"But the papers said the diamonds were worth over \$1 million," Barbara said. "Why are they worthless?"

"Because they can't be sold. The damn diamonds were too good. Close to perfect. Diamonds that valuable usually belong to the very rich. If I bring one into a jeweler, he's bound to get suspicious. I don't know if you know it, but diamonds have 'fingerprints.' It's a photo-electronic process that shoots a picture through the diamond. The really valuable ones, like these, are all registered. If I try selling one, the jeweler will check with the police and I'll wind up in prison."

"But the theft took place in Israel. Surely, it's safe to sell them here."

"No way. Every police force in Europe is looking for these diamonds. You could probably get away with it in the States, but even there I'd suggest waiting a couple of years for them to cool off."

"Is that what you're going to do?"

"Me?" Howard asked. "No. This group will have to be disposed of slowly — a diamond here, another there. Maybe spread over six or seven years, and then only in smaller cities where jewelers tend to be less suspicious. I would have to make a hundred trips to America; it's not worth it for me. But it could be to you."

"For how much?" she asked.

"Fifty thousand dollars for the lot," Howard said.

"I don't have that kind of money," Barbara replied. "But I can manage half — \$25,000."

"For half," Howard said. "The cost is \$25,000 — and you for tonight."

Barbara didn't hesitate.

"Sold," she said.

BARBARA MADE ARRANGEMENTS TO HAVE THE MONEY wired to her the next day, and after it arrived decided to cut her vacation short. There was no sense, she felt, in crossing borders carrying stolen diamonds if it could be avoided. She had no problem with U.S. Customs and put the jewels in a safe deposit vault in her bank, intending to leave them there for two years before starting their sale.

Howard spent a few more days in Nice before heading to Paris and flying home from there. He was a very happy man. Barbara had been a beautiful woman — more beautiful than a man with his looks could expect, he admitted to himself. Besides, \$25,000 for half of his jewelry was not a bad price. Not, he laughed to himself, for \$400 worth of zirconia samples. ●

A terrible realization filled Priscilla's mind. The man wasn't going to kill her. She knew that instinctively. No, he was going to do something much, much worse!

Deadly Dancer

by WILLIAM STETSON

CHARLOTTE SHAW HAD JUST BEGUN her stretching exercises. The stage of the Metropolitan Ballet Theatre had a tendency to be cool and drafty in December, and she wanted to be properly warmed up before she began to dance. Besides, she hadn't danced, not *really* danced, in almost a month. But the first night of Giselle was less than a month away, so it was time to begin cracking down. Not for the role of Giselle — she could dance that in her sleep — but to begin getting in shape.

As she stretched, a young man approached her timidly. It was one of the assistant choreographers, she thought.

"Miss Shaw?"

"Yes?" Charlotte continued her exercises.

"Mr. English would like to see you in his office."

"Tell him I'll be there soon."

"He said to tell you immediately, Miss Shaw."

Charlotte stopped her exercises and glared at the young man's back as he retreated. *Immediately*. Who was George English to tell *her* immediately!

She threw a towel over her shoulders and left the stage, heading for George's office. She thought she could feel the stares of some of the other dancers as she walked through them, head high.

GEORGE ENGLISH SEEMED ILL AT EASE AS CHARLOTTE entered his office. He gave her a perfunctory kiss and motioned for her to sit down.

"Well, Charlotte, you certainly look nice," he said.

"Thank you," she said.

"How long have we known each other Charlotte?"

"Seventeen, eighteen years I guess, George." We met right after I came to the Metropolitan."

English nodded. "I was just an assistant stage manager then, totally in awe of you. In some ways I still am."

"You didn't call me here for this, George" she said.

"No. No I didn't." But I really was thinking of those early days. Your first part, for example."

"Giselle," said Charlotte.

"Yes, Giselle," said English. "I'll never forget your first Giselle. That performance put the Metropolitan Ballet on the map."

"Look, what's going on here?" said Charlotte sharply.

"Now Charlotte," said English in a conciliatory tone. "You've danced that part every year since then."

"That's right."

"That's why I called you here today," said English. "I'm afraid I've some bad news for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"We've decided to make a change this year. We've chosen another dancer for this season's production of Giselle."

"You're crazy," said Charlotte, suddenly cold. "That's *my* part. I've *made* it mine."

"You're probably the greatest Giselle of all time," agreed English soothingly. "It's just that, well, you're thirty-nine years old, Charlotte."

"What of it!" Charlotte seethed. "I can dance as well as ever."

"Your technique is still good. Not what it was five years ago, but good. It's simply that this is a part for a girl, a teenager."

"You can't do this," said Charlotte. "I'll go to the board."

"I'm afraid the board has already agreed to this," said English. "I'm only the artistic director, but this decision was agreed upon by the entire board. Unanimously."

"My husband is a major benefactor to this company," said Charlotte. "He'll have something to say."

"George's financial contributions have been an enormous help to the Metropolitan Ballet, no question," said English. But this is a decision made on purely artistic merits. We can't be swayed by financial considerations."

"And just who have you chosen to replace me?" Charlotte asked bitterly.

English hesitated for a moment. "Priscilla Ford."

"That little bitch! Miss Goody-Two-Shoes. Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. She's not fit to dance in the chorus at Radio City."

"That's not true and you know it, Charlotte," said English. "She's a brilliant young dancer."

"She's too young."

"She's twenty-two, almost perfect."

"She won't have time to prepare for this part. The production is in less than a month."

"Priscilla has danced the role three times with the Boston Ballet," said English. "And we have already started working with her."

Charlotte screamed and jumped to her feet. "Behind my back? You Judas. I made you what you are, I made this company."

"Yes you did, Charlotte," said English. "But the world moves on. Look at it this way. You're the most famous dancer in the world, you're wealthy, you've had a great career. It's time to relax, to enjoy yourself."

"I'm a dancer!" Charlotte moved toward the door. She opened it and stood dramatically in the entrance for a moment. "I am *still* a dancer."

She slammed the door shut behind her. George English loosened his tie and took a deep breath. He slumped into his chair, and began mopping his forehead.

THE TEMPERATURE HAD ALREADY BEGUN TO DROP when Priscilla Ford arrived at the Metropolitan Ballet Theatre at 11 a.m. The dark, sunless sky seemed bleak and cheerless. Her cabdriver had mentioned the possibility of the season's first snow. Already the few neon signs on the street were turned on against the overcast. A steady northern wind pressed against Priscilla as she hurried to the side of the

theatre and climbed up the black steel steps to the stage door.

As she reached for the door she felt a wave of apprehension and fear. Then she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and entered the theatre.

The inside of the theatre was already a colorful, noisy mass of people. Stagehands were moving scenery into place under the direction of the set designer, a number of musicians were in the orchestra pit, warming up their instruments with the groaning, agonized sounds that were so unlike music. Some production people sat in the front rows of the theatre, going over business matters, and on different parts of the stage, dancers, dressed in rehearsal clothes, were doing stretching exercises. Priscilla looked the scene over with an anxious eye: Charlotte Shaw was nowhere to be seen.

A young female dancer rushed up to Priscilla and hugged her impetuously.

"Oh Prissy, I'm so glad for you," she said.

"Thank you, Carolyn," said Priscilla. "I just hope I can handle it."

"Of course you can," said Carolyn. "You'll be great."

"Is Charlotte here?"

Carolyn's face clouded. "No, I haven't seen her. Well, don't let me hold you up. Rehearsal starts in twenty minutes."

PRISCILLA MOVED THROUGH THE REHEARSAL with confidence. It was two days until the dress rehearsal and two weeks until the opening performance, and she was growing in confidence every day. At first she had been disappointed that Charlotte Shaw had refused to coach her with the role, but that disappointment had been buried in the swirl of excitement of preparing for the performance, the rehearsals, the interviews, the wardrobe fittings and photo session.

She finished her rehearsal both exhausted and exhilarated, and the orchestra stood and gave her a smiling, impromptu round of applause, a significant tribute from that toughest of all audiences. She left the stage with the sound of the applause echoing in the near empty theatre.

She quickly showered and changed back into her street clothes. She buttoned her heavy coat, put on her ski hat and gloves, and wound her scarf about her neck.

As she left her dressing room, George English was waiting for her.

He gave her a quick hug. "You were marvelous, Priscilla."

"Thank you, Mr. English."

"Two o'clock tomorrow, dear, and then the dress on Thursday."

"I can't wait. Thank you for this opportunity, Mr. English."

"It's our honor, Priscilla."

She smiled and gave English a quick hug and kiss and then turned and ran toward the stage door.

THERE WAS ALREADY A POWDERY DUSTING OF SNOW on the street and the late afternoon sky was black, the steady fall of snow drifting down through the artificial noon of lights and signs. Priscilla hailed a cab and plunked down breathlessly in the back seat.

"The Village, please. How long has it been snowing?"

"About an hour," said the cab driver. "Looks like it's gonna be a beaut."

Priscilla watched the snowfall as the cab crept southward through the choked traffic. The snowfall seemed to be getting heavier by the minute. A good night to stay in, she thought. I'll make myself some pasta, sip some wine, and watch that Clint Eastwood movie on T.V. tonight. I'm too tired to do anything else anyway.

The snow was swirling in great windy sheets as she stepped from her cab a half block from her apartment. She pulled up the collar of her coat. She always bought the afternoon papers here on her way home, but suddenly she wished she had asked the cab driver to take her right to her door. It was getting to be a nasty little storm.

She bought the papers from the stolid news vendor, who looked half frozen already, his open air corner newsstand an easy target for the whistling wind and pinwheeling snow.

Priscilla tucked the newspapers under her arm, ducked her head, and set out for home. She turned up the narrow street that led to her building and trudged gamely ahead. As she stepped into the darkened little archway in front of her door, she stomped her feet to shake the snow from her shoes and began fumbling clumsily with her gloved hand in her pocket for her keys.

Suddenly she stopped. Something was wrong. She turned her head to see someone standing beside her. A man, a tall man in a parka. She looked down and in the dim light thrown through the snow by a street light she saw some sort of club in the man's hand, a thick hardwood truncheon of some sort. The way the man held the club, poised and cocked at an angle in his big hand, it looked as ominous as a pistol.

"Oh, now look," Priscilla said. "Don't be silly. Don't do anything foolish. If it's money you want, I've got some, not much, but some and you can have it

She held her purse out toward the man, but he ripped it from her grasp with his free hand and flung it out onto the snow.

"Look," said Priscilla, trying to keep her poise, to stifle her overpowering desire to scream. "Let's talk about this. Let's be sensible."

The man laughed, a cynical, mirthless snort, and moved toward her. A terrible realization filled her mind. The man wasn't going to kill her. She knew that instinctively. No, he was going to do something much, much worse. He intended to cripple her, pound her body so she would not be able to dance again.

And that, she knew desperately, would literally be a fate worse than death. . . .

CHARLOTTE SHAW LIT A CIGARETTE as she watched the snow mount up on the street three stories below. She took two quick Bette-Davis-like puffs, then squashed out the cigarette in an ashtray. She looked at her watch. George might not call tonight, maybe not until morning. It would be George, of course, with his long-standing relationship to her and his tact and his position. He would break the dreadful news about Priscilla, how the poor girl had been attacked, right in front of her apartment. Both legs broken. What a pity. The young girl might never dance again. At least she wouldn't be able to star in Giselle.

And George would broach the question, gracefully, tactfully. Such short notice. Awful circumstances. For the good of the company would she consider. . . .

No, he wouldn't call. Too delicate a matter. He'd come to her in person. It was nothing to be handled on the phone. She would wear her burgundy dress; yes, that would be just right.

She smiled suddenly, and stepped away from the window. She raised her arms, stood poised for a moment, then stepped out across her living room, moving with the grace of a young girl to the silent music of the overture from Giselle.

THE RASPING BUZZ AT HER DOOR cut through Charlotte's reverie. She stopped her dance in mid-step, puzzled for a moment. She glanced at her watch. It's time, she suddenly thought. It's George. He wouldn't want me to hear on the radio, or by telephone. He had to come tonight, in person, even in the storm. He really is a dear. It will be just like before.

As the buzzer sounded again she moved to the door, paused, smoothed her dress, took a deep breath. Now remember, first surprise, then concern.

She snapped the lock off the door and opened it, a look of guileless innocence on her face. A young man stood before her, tall, powerful

looking, with flecks of snow in his hair. His hands were deep in the pockets of his parka.

Charlotte gasped. "I told you never to come here."

"So?" the man said mockingly.

"I've already paid you," said Charlotte, annoyed.

"I got another offer, dear," said the man. "*A much better offer.*"

The man reached out and pushed Charlotte backwards into her apartment. He pulled a club from his parka.

A second figure appeared in the doorway behind the man. — Priscilla Ford, her smooth complexion vibrant from the cold. A wistful, almost gentle smile was on Priscilla's lips, but it was her eyes that held Charlotte. Priscilla's clear blue eyes seemed different, and for an instant Charlotte couldn't fathom why. Then as the young man advanced towards her, Charlotte suddenly understood. There was a coldness in Priscilla's eyes now, a hardness born of desperation and ruthless ambition that Charlotte herself had possessed even at that age.

The young girl's ice cold stare held Charlotte transfixed as the man in the parka raised his club to strike. ●

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAKERS

WILLIAM STETSON (*Deadly Dancer*) tells us:

I am a sea mosser by trade. Sea mossaing is a job peculiar to some of the New England coastal villages. I am forty years old.

DOV BEN-GALIL (*A Real Phony*) writes:

Despite my Hebrew name (it is real), I am an American who moved to Israel in March 1979. I live on a moshav, a village not quite as communal as a kibbutz, about fifteen miles from the Lebanese border. While in the States I was a reporter, and spent several years working for UPI. Our moshav manufactures cubic zirconia of the type described in the story, and I cut the stones for my first year on the moshav. I am now writing full time. I am married, with one child, and am thirty-five years old.



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THE INSIDIOUS DR. FU MANCHU

The Yellow Peril, that very workable whipping boy of all cinema, fiction, serials and comic strips in the formative years of all the entertainment media in our world, circa 1913 and Ever After, found its apotheosis in Fu Manchu, the Devil Doctor of 13 novels by Sax Rohmer. A long sentence but Fu Manchu's Oriental image of villainy remains until this very day. Diabolical, fiendish, malevolent, insidious, cunning, inscrutable — throw in cat-green eyes, shaven skull, the drooping string moustache, the long fingernails, mandarin hat and three degrees from English universities and you have the Master Villain who always seeks conquest of the world, domination over "foreign devils" and ultimate mastery of civilized mankind. Fu Manchu — the character who is synonymous with Evil Oriental. Master of disguise, deviser of ingenious torture machines, Fu Manchu was and is the literal blueprint for every single Oriental mastermind-villain created after him. The redoubtable Sir Denis Nayland Smith of Scotland Yard and Dr. Petrie were ever his long-suffering, long-running adversaries. Rohmer's unforgettable Fu is the literary father of Fleming's *Dr. No.*, Odets' *General Yang*, Caniff's *Chang*, *Dr. Wu Fang* of the pulps, and also hordes of imitations including *The Mandarin of The China Doll*, 1963, a Nick Carter adversary, and Avallone's 1981 re-incarnation, the *Lo Te Tsang* of *Death In Yellow*. Warner Oland, Boris Karloff and Christopher Lee have made him imperishable on celluloid but my personal favorite is the Henry Brandon of *Drums of Fu Manchu*, a Republic Serial of 1940. Radio and Television have also limned the Master of Menace, profitably, and to this writing, Fu Manchu is still the image incarnate of Oriental villainy. No small potatoes considering how the world has changed since 1913. But Sax Rohmer knew what he was writing.

Why else would a grown man remember over forty years later the victim strapped to the innards of a tolling, gigantic bell, not to mention the tag line of *Drums of Fu Manchu*: "Sir Nayland Smith — dacoit slave of Fu Manchu!"

Henry Brandon — and Sax Rohmer — made that unforgettable.

— Michael Avallone

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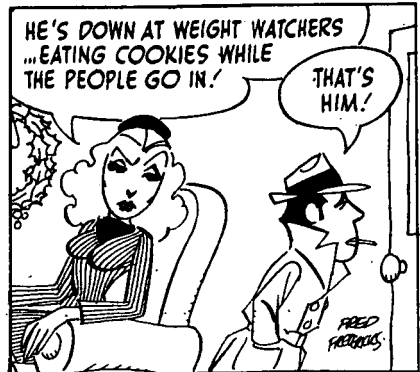
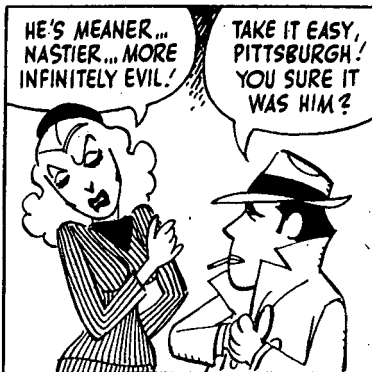
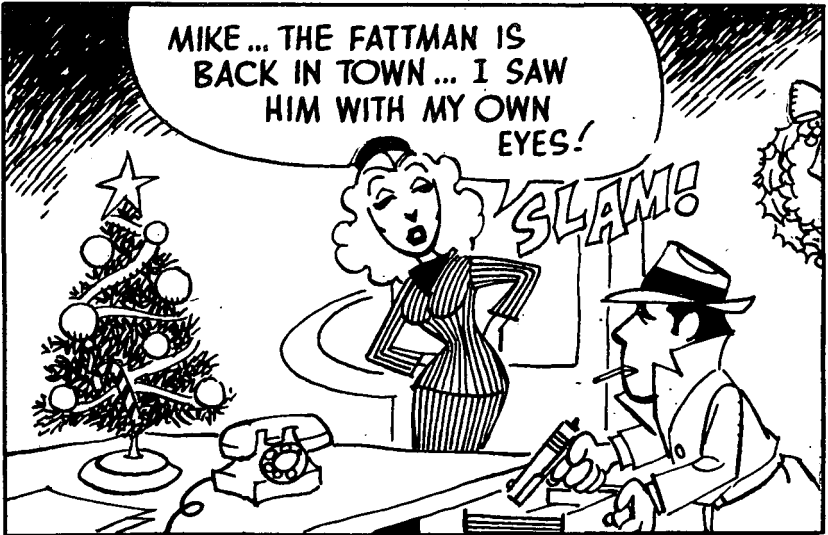
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by FRED FREDERICKS



*It wasn't Saint Nick coming down the chimney. It was
a ghost covered with blood — and revenge was on its
mind!*

'Twas The Night Past The Murder

by VICKI SHAULL CARLETON

'Twas the night past the murder, and all through the house
The widow Beth Thompson did pine for her spouse,
Whose portrait was hung by the chimney with care
To cover the blood which still glistened there.

His will just this day the lawyer had read.
Now, visions of wealth danced in Beth's pretty head.
And she in her nightgown and I in my cap
Had just settled in for a much needed nap

When out on the terrace there came such a clatter
Beth leaped from her bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window she ran in a flash,
Lifted the curtain and batted her lash.

The tracks on top of the fresh-fallen snow
Gave proof to a fact that she'd rather not know.
Then, what to her widening eyes should appear,
But the ghost of her husband, whom once she held dear.

Though paler in death Bill Thompson looked much the same
As he growled and shouted and called them by name:
"Now, Millie! Now, Ted! Now, Garet and Beth!
Which one of my loved ones plotted my death?

To the top of my house, to the top of wall,
Now worry, dears, worry dears, worry dears all!"
As Beth stood there trembling, all frightened and pale,
His ghost let out such an ear-piercing wail.

And up to the rooftop Bill's entity flew
In a suit dripping blood (and an eye missing, too!)
And then in an instant we heard on the roof
A great ghostly jury give voice to the proof.

Beth covered her face and was turning around.
Down from the chimney came Bill with a bound,
Dressed in blood red from his head to his foot,
His face all aflame with slashes and soot.

A shiny white blade he had flung on his back.
He looked quite the menace as he opened his sack.
His figure was gaunt, his manner distrusting.
The odor around him was wholly disgusting.

The razor-sharp blade he drew back like a bow
(I stood out of sight to watch the grim show.)
Beth's discolored scalp he held tight in his hand
While he carefully sliced off her large wedding band.

She collapsed in a heap, and he severed her head.
In a matter of seconds, I knew, she was dead.
Bill was smug and quite pleased and much like an elf,
And I laughed at his antics in spite of myself.

Vengeance was his even though he was dead.
I knew I no longer had reason to dread.
He wasted no time — he got right to work,
Stuffed Beth in his sack and then turned with a smirk.

I sighed with relief and sat pleasantly posed,
Watching as up through the chimney he rose.
I stood at the window and blew him a kiss,
And smiled how I managed such innocent bliss.

What Bill didn't know though his deed had been done:
His vengeance was wasted — he'd killed the wrong one!

*She was a college girl hurrying across a dark lawn.
A girl suddenly not alone. A man looming beside her.
A blow on the head leaving her lips parted on a
scream that never came. And then the beginning of
her endless night, at the hands of a sex-crazed
sadist*

A Mother's Heart

by TALMAGE POWELL

DR. TERRENCE GRAMLING AWOKE THAT FINE SPRING morning thinking about one of his patients, Camilla Jordan. She claimed his conscious mind as he briskly went through the automatics of his morning ritual — icy shower, aerobic exercises timed to the final second, choice of monogrammed underwear, bench-made shoes and gray vested suit by the best tailor in the city. As he emerged from the master bedroom of his expensive, severely-modern bachelor apartment, he looked every inch the successful and brilliant young psychiatrist. With his clipped vandyke, whose lustrous brown matched the color of his hair, he did indeed resemble the Master, a Freud in mid-thirties.

He sat down to a breakfast prepared by his housekeeper-cook — two minute eggs, Danish bacon, wholewheat toast and a cup of steaming Swiss mocha. As he ate, he beheld the new day through floor to ceiling glass that opened onto the balcony-terrace of his condominium. Golden warmth of sun. Clear azure sky. Birds singing, mating, wheeling in exuberant flight. Saps all rising to burst brilliant green through the

landscaping of the courtyard. Spring...time of renewal...the moment for Camilla....

She had never been very far from his mind during the long past months that he had been her messiah. Now on this lovely spring morning his mind held a calculated inspiration for her. Perhaps his subconscious in its primeval wisdom had turned the final key while he'd slept....

DR. GRAMLING WAS CHIEF OF STAFF AT HAVEN HILL, a private sanatorium for the wealthy. He had chosen psychiatry because the infinite jungle of the human mind offered a challenge worthy of his talents. Even in medical school, comparing himself to his fellow students, he had assumed that he would quickly make a name for himself. And so he had. In a science so filled with mystery and uncertainty, Gramling was never visibly unsure of himself. He preferred to ignore his failures, of which even genius must suffer a few, but he was never reticent or shy about bringing his successes into the light of public and projected. Even hoary old colleagues, savants among the chosen, spoke Gramling's name nowadays with a nod of respect.

Haven Hill claimed fifteen gently rolling acres behind stone walls softened and subdued by clinging ivy. As Gramling's white jag nosed past the wrought-iron gate, his fiefdom spread before him, carpet-like green lawns, walkways bordered by clipped boxhedges, the shadows of majestic live oaks, the white purity of multi-storied colonial style buildings with verandas tucked behind the tall columns. Here and there ambulatory patients were strolling in the company of nurses in the soft blue uniforms that Gramling, having done a study on the emotional effects of color, favored for his personnel. But it was the dark skeins beneath this surface patina of peace that absorbed Terrence Gramling. At Haven Hill in the space of a few weeks he would deal with a broader range of cases than many of his colleagues would experience in half a lifetime. Hill patients varied in age from six to octogenarian; and such a circus of fetishes, fixations, obsessions, compulsions, regressions, and you-name-it. Never was an orchard more fruitful, Gramling thought; and the pun was a verity, fully intended.

AS SOON AS HE WAS IN HIS SPACIOUS, WALNUT-PANELLED private office, he rang for Iva Twugg. She was a short, dumpy woman of middle age whose blue eyes, an echo of the color of her uniform, had seen it all.

"Good morning, Twugg."

The head nurse nodded a respectful, impersonal, neutral response,

as Gramling would have it.

He stood behind the precise order of his huge desk. "I want to see Camilla Jordan, Nurse. Right away."

"Yes, Doctor."

"And phone Camilla's parents. I want them to come over for a talk. We may have something encouraging to discuss, the parents and I."

"Yes, Doctor."

"And tell my private secretary, as you go out, to bring in Camilla's file while you're fetching our patient."

"Yes, Doctor."

Twugg ushered Camilla into the office fifteen minutes later. The head nurse lingered at the patient's side, easing away; and Gramling's vandyke twitched below his brightest smile as Camilla stood alone in the middle of quiet office.

"Good morning, Camilla. You're looking wonderful. Isn't it a lovely day?"

She looked at him steadily, in silence. In her early twenties, she was a slender creature of dark, exotic beauty. Her straight black hair was brushed to glistening highlights, framing the shadowed angles of her face. Neatly manicured, in an expensive, simple white dress, she seemed to have stepped from a society page. But there were two almost obscure details.. the faint bulge of her dress over her abdomen, and the inverted cone of blackness in her eyes...eyes that nailed on Gramling with the intensity of a frozen bunny rabbit's.

At Gramling's slight nod, Twugg continued her retreat, softly closing the office door as she melted away. Camilla's eyes jerked to the closed door, and Gramling knew she was feeling her isolation in this room with a male. He heard the hiss of her indrawn breath; it seemed he could feel her pulse rate thud through the room.

Once, the nearness of a male would have triggered her to violence, to a mad, screaming, tooth-and-claw struggle to escape. But Dr. Terrence Gramling had, at least, eased her from that precipice. This morning she pulled from the invisible knife-edge through a racking effort of her own, turning slowly to face him finally. She tilted away from his friendly smile, but at last accepted his gentle gesture and nod and eased onto the chair near his desk.

He moved quietly to a table in the further corner, picked up a silver carafe and poured steaming coffee into two bone-china cups. "Let's see," he smiled casually over his shoulder, "it's two sugars and a spot of cream, isn't it?"

She pressed back in the chair, clutching the leather-upholstered arms.

He crossed over to her, both hands burdened with cups and saucers. "There now. Nothing like a second morning cup, is there?"

He stood for a long moment with a cup and saucer extended. Gradually her slender hand moved to accept it. He strolled from her, going behind his desk, sitting in his high-backed chair, sipping his coffee and murmuring a sound of pleasure. Watching him, she slowly brought her own cup to her lips.

He rocked back casually. "Did you finish the 'Times of Helena'? I didn't. Personally, it seemed a dull, superficial book." He tilted his cup against his mouth, lowered it, continued in the quiet, conversational tone, "Just because they're best sellers doesn't mean they're good books. Do you think?"

She looked at him, saying nothing.

"By the way, from the fine healthy look of you," he said, "the pregnancy is coming along marvellously."

Her cup rattled on its saucer. Her other hand moved to lay its curled fingers against her slightly swollen stomach. She had carried her pregnancy for two years now. It was her reality. The sun might spill ice; the stars disappear from an unreal sky. But the pregnancy...it was the singular actuality behind the cone-points of blackness in her eyes.

"He's very quiet," she said, fingertips kneading. "The baby stretched and squirmed in there half the night. But now he must be sleeping."

SHE HAD CARRIED THE NON-EXISTENT BABY FROM THE morning after the nearly-fatal battering and rape. College girl, out late, hurrying across a dark lawn to her sorority house. A girl suddenly not alone. A man looming beside her, as if a part of a tree had detached itself. A blow on her head leaving her lips parted on a scream that never came. A drifting in the darkness. Then stars, twinkling distantly above a wooded hill in the hands of a sex-crazed sadist....

A farm worker had spotted her at early dawn staggering along a country road. Drunk, he'd thought. Then his thoughts had turned to fire and ice as she'd stumbled blindly closer. He'd gasped and stood rooted for a moment by the sight of the battered and desecrated image. Then he'd got her to the hospital. The first hospital. She'd been one of the few virgins in her sorority house.

She'd now carried the pregnancy through the two years of padded cells, shock treatment, chemo-therapy, psychoanalysis. So powerful was her obsession that her menstrual periods altered and her abdomen had that visible bulge.

Of all the doctors, only Gramling had helped her to a measurable degree. And to him, the case was a chaffing frustration, a challenge to his science, his ingenuity.

"Camilla," his voice reached gently, "it has been a long and difficult pregnancy, and I know what it will mean to you to have it end."

"Oh, God..." Her body cramped forward. Her cup and saucer fell to the carpet and spun to rest. "...if only I could have this baby!"

"Look at me, and believe." He was the prophet down from the clouds. "You must believe. You are nearing the end of your pregnancy."

MR. AND MRS. JORDAN, HORACE AND HARRIET, WERE A smallish, bland, gray, gently polite and very wealthy couple who gave some credence to the belief that people long married tend to look alike as they pass the years and grow old together.

With inherited money from both their families, they might have spent their lives faced only by the problems of where to spend the the winters or summers and whom to have in as weekend house guests. All that had changed two years ago. They'd taken their daughter to the finest psychiatrist in New York, to a famous clinic in Switzerland, to Mendoza in Mexico City who, they'd heard, had worked a miracle in several cases similar to Camilla's. At last, three months ago, they'd appeared at Haven Hill with an open checkbook seeking a reservation.

This lovely spring morning they drove quickly from their rented house in response to the call by Gramling's secretary. Gramling crossed the thick carpet as they were shown into his office. He shook Horace's tensile hand and gave Harriet a warm, friendly squeeze about her slender shoulders. Their eyes were hard on his face, daring a small light of hope.

As he strolled them toward his desk, he said, "I do have a proposal."

He sensed their heightened strain. Before questions starting pouring from their lips, he requested crisply, "Let me outline what I have in mind, first. Then you may ask whatever you like."

They sank stiffly on the edges of the massive leather chairs he'd arranged in front of his desk. Gramling walked around and remained standing behind the desk.

"We have brought Camilla a long way," he preambled.

"Yes, Doctor," Horace choked, "from the days of strait jackets and wet-sheet packs."

"But we've not yet surmounted the key obstacle," Gramling said.

"The baby . . ." The eyes of Camilla's mother filled. "When I see her feeling her stomach, talking about the non-existent child in her womb..."

"And yet," Mr. Jordan choked, "so very normal at times...until she feels the stirring of the baby that isn't there...if the baby were...exorcised...Camilla would return to us...maybe not entirely the Camilla we once knew, but we would have our daughter back."

"But so many things have been tried," Harriet said. "Drugs, shock, even hypnotism. Is anything left?"

"Perhaps," Gramling said. "A long shot. The therapy lay full blown in my mind when I awoke this morning. It has been working through my mind for days." He hesitated for a short beat. "We shall take the baby."

He felt their reaction. The office was silent for a moment while they stared at him. Then Harriet's lips moved. "A baby that isn't real? You mean..."

"I think you know precisely what I mean," Gramling said. "Nothing more can be done for Camilla until the pregnancy obsession is removed. Once she is convinced that she isn't carrying a baby, we might break through. Destroy the obsession. Set her on the path to final recovery."

"If it could only be," Harriet wept.

"Destroy a delusion with a counter delusion, Doctor?" Horace said.

"It's not uncommon in my field of medicine," Gramling said.

"How will you go about it?"

"First, give Camilla something to make her tractable. Then go through all the motions, to the final detail, even leaving her with a mild uterine soreness. And, when the long obstretrical procedure is over, break the news to Camilla carefully that she has miscarried. Her pregnancy is over, done with, and she is free of it forever. She is as free, clear, unsullied as she was the night before the assault upon her. That is the thought which we shall implant, reinforce, develop — leaving no room for thought of pregnancy."

Horace strained forward. "What are chances of it working?"

"What are chances of it not working?" Gramling countered. "But I shall of course need your permission."

THAT EVENING, DINING ON SURF AND TURF, GRAMLING reviewed the hours after he'd shown Horace and Harriet Jordan out of his office. He'd called in Conover and Hemmings, two of his most able nurses, and briefed them carefully. Then the ritual...the ceremonial staged to open a human mind, extract a thought and implant another...

He'd taken Camilla through the routine of examination. Returned her to her room. Appeared a little later at her bedside with the news that a follow-up was necessary. Soothed her with scopoline. Prepped her. Wheeled her into surgery. Gowns, masks, rubber gloves, all the trappings. Anesthetized her mildly. Removed her to the recovery room exactly as if she'd gone through an operation. From there, back to her room. And finally, while Camilla was in that nether state, that twilight zone known since the first use of scopolamine, Gramling had sat by her bed, taken her hand, and whispered that she'd developed complications. They'd had to take the baby. Her pregnancy was finished. The baby was gone, forever.

She'd lain passively, looking at him.

He'd moved his face a little closer. "Do you hear me, Camilla?"

"Yes," she'd whispered.

"Do you understand? You are free. It is over. You are bound no longer. You can stretch, laugh, lift your face and throw your arms to the sun. Once more you are Camilla, and only Camilla."

She'd closed her eyes slowly, and Gramling had risen, nodding at the nurse assigned to Camilla's bedside. "We've turned a corner," he'd said softly. "Now...during the days ahead...the careful, skillful follow-up...."

Now, as he poured a quick after-dinner Benedictine, he was already planning the follow-up, the guidance he would give to Camilla.

He glanced at his watch. He set down the small brandy snifter with quickening movement. He was picking up Marcy Lewis, his favorite among his women friends, in an hour. Marcy was a department store executive, and enjoyed an occasional evening of Wagner as much as he did.

AT LAST, CAMILLA OPENED HER EYES AND SAID, "Please...may I have something cold? A Coke? And something to nibble on?"

Miss Archer, the young blonde nurse on duty until midnight, laid aside her Gothic novel. She smiled serenely. "Coke? Of course, Miss Jordan. But something to eat?" She glanced at the heavy numerals of the watch on her wrist. "It's almost eleven o'clock. The kitchen's long-since closed, the last of the help home and fast asleep. But perhaps..." She rose quietly. "...I could raid the 'fridge. Nothing substantial, mind you, not so soon after surgery. What would you like? Bit of fruit? Perhaps a little cup of custard?"

"No, please. Don't make me feel like a bother. Just a Coke and package of those little crackers from the vending machine in the rec room."

Miss Archer nodded, moved to the door, paused and looked at the bed. The patient's eyes had already closed once more. Miss Archer shrugged. She could always go for a Coke herself, if Jordan didn't re-awaken.

In her veil of darkness, Camilla heard the click of the door latch. Her eyelids snapped. Light scorched her. She eeled out of bed, steadied herself through a gasping moment, and reached toward the closet where her lavender silk robe hung.

A moment later, she cracked the door and looked out into the corridor. It was a long, dimly-lighted cavern, empty, silent. Belted robe swishing, she was out quickly, a wraith slipping into a stairwell, disappearing.

GRAMLING'S PHONE WAS BURRING AN INSISTENT DEMAND when he keyed open his apartment door. He rushed through the soft glow of the night light, past the shadowy impressions of Danish modern furnishings, and snatched up the phone in the middle of its next snarl.

"Doctor," the stone-like voice was that of night nursing supervisor Stephens, "Camilla Jordan has disappeared."

The pleasant after-glow of his evening with Marcy Lewis was consumed in a quick fire. His teeth clicked; his knuckles whitened. "How did it happen? Who was on duty in her room?"

"Archer, Doctor, the young RN who just came to us from Central Hospital."

"Who can pack and return to Central's payroll as of this moment," Gramling rasped. "Was she catching a catnap?"

"Hardly, Doctor. She stepped into the rec room to get the patient a soft drink."

Gramling's thin nostrils flared out a breath. "And when she stepped back in, she found the covers thrown back, the bed empty. Well, so much for that. It's done now, isn't it? I'll be there immediately. She must not leave the grounds — and not a hint of a patient-escape leaking out, especially to the local press."

"Of course, Doctor. We started searching on the instant. She will never get over the walls."

SHIVERING, CAMILLA STEPPED FROM THE MEAT COOLER into the dim vastness of the institutional kitchen. Before her in the faint light filtering from the night outside were obscure details, the long table where food was prepared, the butcher's block with its rack of knives, the gas-fired ranges, the rows of pots and skillets dangling

from the long rafter overhead.

Haven Hill had been home for two long years, and she knew every door and passageway. Once out of her room, she'd hurried down a service stairs. At a doorway in the ground-level corridor, she'd known a search had already started. She'd heard footsteps crackling quickly on tile, voices, subdued but strained, calling out her absence from her room. She'd crossed quickly into the kitchen. They would search every hallway, each linen and storage closet, she'd known. Even the kitchen. When she'd heard the quick approach of footsteps, she'd ducked into the cooler between hanging loins of beef, the side of a pig, the quarter of a veal. As from a muffled distance, she'd heard the brief murmur of voices when two of them had clicked a light on and off in the emptiness of the kitchen.

Now they were gone, and she drifted to the tall windows. She saw the light of electric torches flickering, moving about the dark landscape. In the distance jouncing headlights marked a pickup truck. That would be Pickens, the maintenance supervisor, cruising carefully, hoping to catch sight of her as she tried for the ivy-grown outer wall.

She drew back from the shadowy window, nodding slowly. Very well. Quite well. Let them search the trees and shrubs and pan along the wall, searching in all the wrong places....

CASTLENEAU, THE NIGHT MAN IN GRAY SECURITY GUARD'S uniform, swung open the wrought-iron gate and the white jag shot through. Gramling slammed the car to an immediate halt and looked up through the open side window as Castleneau bent and peered in.

"Well?" Gramling demanded through gritted teeth.

"Not yet, Doctor. But we'll find her. She is still inside the grounds."

"Are you absolutely certain?"

"As sure as I can be of anything. She simply didn't have that much time. I had Pickens, his crew, orderlies and aides spreading about the perimeter in everything available on wheels within thirty seconds after the night nursing supervisor notified me. Camilla Jordan will have to grow wings to get out of here."

"Very well." Gramling was only slightly mollified. "But every second counts. She is a patient, Castleneau. Don't forget that for a moment. No telling what she will do. It's worth your hide if she hurts herself."

"If we had a few more people..."

"You will have people in sufficient number to take Haven Hill apart," Gramling said, gunning the engine. "I'll have day crews, from grass cutters to RN's reporting in immediately. Nobody gets any sleep

until Camilla Jordan is safely back in her room."

Gramling threw the clutch, and the jag shot toward the white shadows of colonial buildings at the further end of the driveway.

CAMILLA STOOD IN THE SOFT DARKNESS of the munificent, walnut-panelled office, looking at the deeper shadows of chairs in leather, the imposing desk with its high-backed chair like a throne upon the heights. This was Terrence Gramling's sanctum, his lair, the place where his mind wormed in its patterns.

She turned her head, hearing the sound of his voice speaking to someone out in the corridor. She eased backward, until her shoulder blades were pressed against the wall close beside the door.

She heard the sound of the doorknob turning in his hand.

And she was quite prepared. Her face was a glint of sweat-slick whiteness. The cones of black erupted in her eyes. Her right hand was lifted, poised, her fingers burning with strength as they gripped the cleaver from the butcher's block.

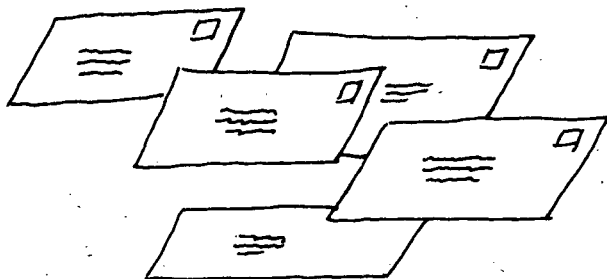
The door opened. And in walked the unspeakable monster who had destroyed her child....

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAKERS

LEE DUIGON (*The Bun Man*) says:

After a stint as a professional term-paper writer, and an abortive venture into the teaching profession, I was hired as a stringer for a small weekly. Ten days later I was named associate editor; and from there I went on to become a reporter and managing editor for a large weekly, where I stayed five years. I walked out last summer because I was tired of sitting up till midnight three nights a week listening to politicians babble at public meetings. In addition to writing, I play softball and simulation games, enjoy fishing and boating, and belong to the New York Herpetological Society. I'm married to a marvelously supportive wife who doesn't mind if I fill the bedroom up with lizards, turtles, and rodents.

MIKE'S MAIL



SMUTTY?

Please cancel the magazine as there is too much girly and smutty stuff. I like clean stories.

W.J. Cunningham
3060 SE Stark St.
Portland, Oregon 97214

I wish you'd been more specific, W.J., because I'm sure our other readers would like to know where the dirty parts are. I know I would. Since I have to guess, I suspect you might mean Mike Shayne's interest in women. We don't dwell on it to the detriment of the story, but after all, Mike's a tall, ruggedly handsome, virile guy. It might raise a few eyebrows if he sneaked some hand-holding under the table with Tim Rourke, but the fact that he gets the urges most people get shouldn't surprise anybody. I've always thought it kind of odd that some readers don't mind characters getting murdered or maimed, but if a natural physical attraction appears between male and female Of course that might not

be what you meant at all. I keep telling you, gang, if you want to complain, be specific so I know what you're talking about. Sorry to lose you, W.J., but smut is often in the eye of the beholder, and I'm sure most of our other readers can cope with our stories.

NEW SUBSCRIBER

I'm sending a bouquet on MSMM. I just found two MSMM, April and August 1980 issues, and was I ever thrilled with them, as long as Mike is there. Yes, he is my #1 detective. Where have I been not to have seen one of these MSMM's before? And to think of all I have missed. I can't find but a very few Mike Shayne paperbacks in many stores, so I usually end up at the Book Exchange Store, trading mine for others. I'm putting my address at the bottom here, hoping if anyone has any MSMM, please let me know. Would love to read them.

Mike is the greatest. Didn't care too much for the short stories. Mike's Mail, fine. The longer stories, OK. Book reviews and minibiographies are fine, too. Now to start with Mike and end with Mike would be wonderful.

Keep up the good work.

Mary A. Head
517 Corum Drive
Madisonville, KY 42431
(502) 825-3059

See what I mean about Mike and the ladies! Welcome to the gang, Mary, but watch yourself in the clinches. That big red-headed shamus could really turn your head.

Got something you'd like to say to Mike, the authors, the editor, the publisher, other readers, the world in general? Write to: Mike's Mail, MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Renown Publications, P.O. Box 178, Reseda, CA 91335. Let's hear from you!

STIFF COMPETITION

BOOK REVIEWS

by JOHN BALL

Starting a new book by Dorothy Uhnak is usually like biting into a freshly baked hard roll: it will have crispness and much to savor. Mrs. Uhnak's latest effort, *False Witness*, isn't going to add greatly to her reputation. The story is built around a violently overambitious, utterly bitchy female assistant D.A. whose ruthlessness is her final undoing — if the reader is still with her at the finish. Mrs. Uhnak can and does write with great skill and authenticity (she was a New York Transit police officer for fourteen years), but this time her material will have most of her male readers thoroughly turned off. When a black talk show hostess, who is a heavy supporter of the PLO, is maimed and very nearly murdered, the assistant D.A. goes into action. She does her best to cut every throat in the process, and her overstress, on the, to

many, distasteful "Ms." abbreviation is annoying. A tough story with a major element lacking: someone to cheer for. (Simon and Schuster, \$12.95)



Arthur Maling, the author of the very popular Brock Potter novels, breaks new ground with the story of an army deserter who takes refuge in Canada and kills a policeman there, and his brother, a famous popular singer, who tries to help him escape from the country. The book is called *From Thunder Bay*. The criminal brother is into gun running in addition to everything else. Since the outcome is inevitable, the suspense generated by Mr. Maling's excellent writing is somewhat diluted, but he does a very good job in drawing out the agony. The book is, as it must be, a downer and does not have the brisk, engaging kind of action found in the Potter series. The story telling, of what is essentially a tragedy, is first rate, as would be expected from this author. (Harper and Row, \$11.95)



A new and very remarkable talent is revealed in the suspense novel, *Suspect* by B. M. Gill. This lady is the author of one previous novel, *Death Drop*, that won an Edgar nomination. She's British and that's all we know about her except for the fact that she can write like a fiend. When three women, all associated with a hospital staff, are found savagely murdered, a slow suspicion begins to mount against a local man who blames the chief surgeon of the hospital for his wife's paralytic condition. Consequently he does irrational things and digs himself in deeper and deeper. This is basically a psychological novel and as such it is an absolute dandy. The police are in it too, seen from a slightly different angle. If you enjoy books that probe into people's minds, don't let this one get by unread. (Scribners, \$9.95)



Send in the Lions by Eric Clark is a well written book on an unfortunately overworked theme: the hijacking of an airliner in order to force the release of some terrorists from prison. Also the familiar device of the retired agent who is called back for one more fling is once again used. Since the idea is threadbare, much of the author's

very good work is wasted, plus which we are bound to report that the ending is a contrived disappointment. There is no question concerning Mr. Clark's writing talents, but his plot defeats him here. (Atheneum, \$10.95)



Definitely for the ladies is *The Bride of Lowther Fell* by Margaret Forster. Our heroine is Alexandra Grove, a young woman who is so set on her own independence she blocks out much that could give her greater happiness. Laid in the highlands of Scotland, the story deals with the suspicious local people, her unsatisfactory nephew she is required to raise, and some gruesome incidents that are put in her way. There is a considerable element of suspense and a good climax that will satisfy most readers. (Atheneum, \$11.95)



A good English crime novel with a double plot is *Drink This* by Eileen Dewhurst. While he is giving communion, the curate of a small village church takes his own cup and is fatally poisoned. This, certainly, is a new idea as far as we know. In the same village a notorious embezzler has disappeared and his wife is suspected of knowing his whereabouts. Into this happy rural scene comes Detective Inspector Neil Carter presumably on holiday. You know what to expect after that and in this instance, you won't be disappointed. For lovers of the classic British whodunit, here is one you will definitely enjoy. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$9.95)



British novelist Ellis Peters (Edith Pargeter) created Brother Cadfael, the medieval detective, in a memorable book, *A Morbid Taste For Bones*, that deserves classic status. After a sequel that was adequate, the good brother is back with us once again in *Monk's Hood* and, what is more, he is in fine form. There is a splendid murder, this one done by poison and Brother Cadfael, who cares for the herb garden in Shrewsbury Abbey, is the man called upon to resolve the problem. This is a fine medieval romp that incorporates much of the exceptional entertainment found in the first of this series. Miss Peters, and her monks, are a complete delight. (Morrow, \$9.95)



Victor Canning, whose reputation in the genre is secure, has a most unusual offering in his latest, *Fall From Grace*. The entire book is devoted to the circumstances leading up to an act of violence of the kind that in so many thousands of other works constitutes the opening pages. An enthusiastic gardener, who is also a blackmailer and a considerable hand with the women, gradually works his way into a position of genuine security and trust on a bishop's estate. He has it made in every way, but when he stumbles on a piece of compromising evidence in the bishop's personal papers, he cannot resist the temptation to go back into business as a blackmailer. He has gotten his latest girl friend pregnant and marriage is very much on his mind. And then . . . (Morrow, \$9.95)



Veteran mystery author Josephine Bell has used the very old, but still valid baby switching technique in her latest novel, *A Question of Inheritance*. When the heir to a British fortune dies in his crib, his mother, fearful of her violent husband's wrath, buries the infant and, after her husband's untimely but unregretted death, she manages to substitute another baby obtained by an ingenious device. The plan works quite well and the child grows up to inherit a fortune. As has to happen, the grave of the long dead infant is discovered and everything pops loose. You can always depend on Miss Bell for a "good read" and she certainly comes through here in her usual fine style. (Walker, \$9.95)



Some famous titles are showing up in paperback reprint. Among the latest to be made available are five from Harper and Row's Perennial Library. They are *The African Poison Murders* by Elspeth Huxley, *Who is Next?* by Henry Kitchell Webster, *With a Bare Bodkin* by Cyril Hare, *Malice Aforethought* by Francis Iles, and another Cyril Hare work *Tragedy at Law*. Whoever is choosing these books knows the field and deserves warm thanks for making available some of the best of the literature in modern paperback. Prices vary between \$1.95 and \$2.25. If you are looking for a good current title to read, you won't be disappointed if you choose Dick Francis' *Whip Hand*, available from Pocket Books for \$2.75. ●

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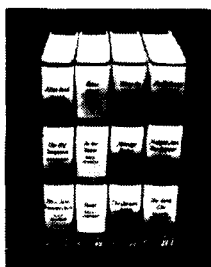
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